



## Continuing 40 Days of Prayer | Advent | God With Us

### Week 1: Born to Deliver | Hope

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. John 1: 1-5*

As we begin this sacred season of Advent and wait on Christmas, I would like to share with you a few of the things I believe in this Christmas.

I believe that no fancy dessert will ever match the taste of warm Christmas cookies straight from the oven; snow is best when it sticks to the grass but not on the roads; everything that is important will somehow get done; and a good cup of coffee can lead to good conversation.

I believe most people have a good heart and want to be generous; the smallest gifts are often the best; there is no such thing as too many friends; if we laughed at ourselves a little bit more, we would be far less stressed; and there are new dreams out there for the wise to follow.

I believe that God still speaks to us; miracles and my amazing family. God has given me wonderful people to be in ministry with. I am truly blessed because God has allowed me the pleasure of serving you, and Christmas, because I believe in God, and for that reason I believe in love.

God came to us as a small baby so that we may know how much we are loved, a child who grew to a man and taught, preached, healed and performed miracles. Most importantly, Jesus was Emmanuel, "God with us" who died on a cross for our sins. Because of Jesus, each day can be a celebration of new life. This Christmas I hope as you, your family and your friends celebrate, you will take some time to share what you believe. I hope you take time to worship, sing Christmas carols, and read the story of the first Christmas. May you and those you love know the hope, the peace, joy and love that comes from the Good News that Christ was born. May you enter the New Year trusting that God is with us. *Gina Yeske*

**Prayer:** Amazing God who offers us freely the gifts of hope, peace, joy and love, we give our thanks. Help us to keep these treasures at the forefront during this busy season. Today we choose to believe in your promises and will endeavor to live in a way that gives you all the glory. Amen.

#### Emmanuel God With Us

*From the mountain's edge to the valley low  
When the river's wild and the sea billows roll  
From your perfect presence I cannot escape  
You're ever with me I trust your name*

*Emmanuel, God with us  
In day or darkness, Lord you are here  
Emmanuel, God with us  
I need you Jesus so draw me near*



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*You're the purest joy in the shadows deep  
So my soul will sing when I find no melody  
From your perfect presence I cannot escape  
You're ever with me I trust your name*

*My heart and flesh may fail you but God you never will  
You are my strength and shield my portion forever*

Songwriter: Brett Land, Chris Collins, Aaron Ivey  
Performed by Austin Stone

### **Readings for Week 1**

December 1	Isaiah 40:1-5
December 2	Isaiah 40: 6-11
December 3	Isaiah 40: 21-31
December 4	Luke 1: 8-17
December 5	Luke 1: 18-25
December 6	Luke 1:57-66
December 7	Luke 1: 67-80



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### Week 2: The Path of Peace | Peace

*Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends! I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, my true companion, help these women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you. Philippians 4:1-9*

With Christmas just a couple of weeks away, it's so easy to become overwhelmed with our long to-do lists filled with activities like shopping for the perfect gifts and trimming the tree and not-so fun errands and chores like going grocery shopping and preparing our homes for guests. Of course, there is nothing wrong with doing any of these things. In fact, many of them are what make the Christmas season so special and create great memories. But they are also the things that drain and deplete us, making this one of the most hectic times of the year.

For some of us, the stress comes as we look back over the past year with some regrets and disappointments or look toward the coming year with trepidation and anxiety. There are also many people who find themselves alone or in mourning during this season. Whatever emotions Advent stirs up for us, we can find encouragement and hope in Apostle Paul's exhortation to the Philippian church. In response to a dispute between two women, Paul urges them and the entire faith community to take their concerns to God instead of trying to fix things on their own. This message is meant for us, too. When we bring God into our challenges and circumstances, we find the kind of peace that only God can provide. Nothing we are facing is too big or too small for God to handle. It is God's desire to journey with us in all the events of our lives.

Paul's letter also teaches us to be intentional and careful about what we spend our time thinking about. Our busyness often leads us to lose sight of what we are supposed to be celebrating. Paul reminds us that Christ embodied everything that is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy. As his disciples, we can focus on these virtues too when we put Christ at the center of all we do this season. *Alicia Grey, Wesley Theological seminary student*

**Prayer:** Loving God, help us to experience hope and peace in the midst of this season that can be so hectic and difficult. May we sense your presence all around us, uplifting us and reminding us that no matter what we feel this season, you are near. Amen.

*Emmanuel God With Us Forever  
Before you set the age of time  
Foundations of the earth and sky  
You saw it all  
You said that it was good*



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*The joy was set before your eyes  
You knew that you would give your life  
You saw it all  
You said that it was good*

*Behold behold the one  
Our love is come  
Behold behold the one  
Our king is come*

*Then heavens wore  
The earth stood still  
His final breath  
He tore the veil  
The angels sang holy is his name*

*Emmanuel  
God with us forever  
Emmanuel  
Savior of the world  
Emmanuel Emmanuel*

Songwriters: Kyle Wayne Lee, Anthony Warren Skinner, Katie Torwalt, Bryan Torwalt  
Performed by: , Katie Torwalt, Bryan Torwalt

## **Readings Week 2**

December 8     Isaiah 2: 1-5  
December 9     1 Peter 3: 8-18  
December 10    Romans 12: 9-21  
December 11    Philippians 4: 1-9  
December 12    Psalm 103  
December 13    Isaiah 26: 1-19  
December 14    John 14: 1-27



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### Week 3: Rejoice, Rejoice | Joy

*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.” And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home. Luke 1: 46-56*

In one of my classes during my doctoral studies at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC, we had to figure out how to make the scripture come alive for our congregations. Our group was assigned the passage in Luke 1, often referred to as *The Magnificat*.

The passage not only shows that somehow this girl, child Mary, was well-acquainted with her scriptures; she also had a depth of understanding beyond her teenaged years as to the mission and purpose of God’s in-breaking into human history in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

On that January morning, we read it a few times together as a group to hear it in some new ways. The women run to greet one another, excited to be together since they lived in different towns and wouldn’t have had much time or opportunity to visit. Mary bursts into this marvelous poem spontaneously in the midst of greeting, catching up with, and embracing her cousin, Elizabeth. This is girl-talk. These beautiful words spoken to glorify God, were spoken in the midst of an intimate and life-giving conversation. These two women had both been given incredible gifts from God, which sometimes felt a little more like a burden than a gift.

Elizabeth would have a child in her later years of life, for she was well passed the normal age for childbearing. Mary was at the other end of the spectrum, a young teenage girl and yet able to submit herself fully to God for the sake of God’s intervention in history. She did so risking the condemnation of her family and friends. Seeing this passage in the context of two women greeting one another in love and sharing each other’s joy and apprehension gives it a whole new twist for me. I now hear and understand this text differently. I think of the many conversations I’ve had with friends over the years; life-giving conversations of encouragement and grace; challenging words that helped me grow; and words of unconditional love that surrounded me, even when I didn’t deserve it.

Yes! That’s it...it makes perfect sense that God would use these two faithful women to keep each other strong. I am thankful for the women in my life (many of whom you will meet on these pages) that journey with me even as Mary and Elizabeth journeyed together. *Rev. Gabrielle Martone, Pearl River UMC*

**Prayer:** Thank you Lord for the amazing and wonderful people in my life who journey with me; encourage me; and help me to stay faithful to you and your call on my life. I ask your very special blessing on them today that we might strive to hold each other accountable to stay of good courage in the midst of life’s obstacles. In Christ we pray, Amen.

*Oh ven, Emanuel  
¡Oh ven!, ¡Oh ven, Emanuel!  
Libra al cautivo Israel,*



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*Que sufre desterrado aquí, Y espera al  
Hijo de David.*

*¡Alégrate, oh Israel! Vendrá, ya viene  
Emanuel. ¡Oh ven, Tú, Vara de Isaí!  
Redime al pueblo infeliz Del poderío  
infernol  
Y danos vida celestial.*

*¡Oh ven, Tú, Aurora celestial! Alúmbranos  
con tu verdad, Disipa toda oscuridad,  
Y danos días de solaz.*

Translator: Federico J. Pagura  
Performed By Rick Trevino

### **Readings Week 3**

December 15	Luke 1:26-38
December 16	Luke 1:39-45
December 17	Luke 1: 46-56
December 18	Isaiah 43: 1-13
December 19	John 3:16-21
December 20	Deuteronomy 7: 7-9
December 21	1 John 4: 7-21



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### Week 4: O Come, Emmanuel | Love

*Now the birth of Jesus, the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. Matthew 1:18-25*

Do you like driving? I cannot forget the feeling of liberty when I first drove by myself to the post office in Madison. Since then, I have enjoyed driving because of its autonomy to be where and when I wish to be. However, I don't have a good sense of direction, so almost all the time I'm driving, I rely on the navigation on my phone to provide me detailed instructions corner to corner. As I drive with the navigation, I've learned it does not always offer the best route to my destination. So, I like to have a company from the local area who knows some secret tips for driving like how to avoid traffic or where to park.

Today we read the story of Joseph, how he ended up becoming Jesus' earthly father. He might feel betrayed and disappointed at his fiancé when he figured out her premarital pregnancy. However, his initial plan was still gracious and merciful to her - dismissing her quietly. It might have been the best decision he could make. However, God's plan was beyond his best one. It was beyond his imagination, opening a new chapter of eternal life for all humanity.

The baby in Mary's womb was God's fulfillment of the promise of Emmanuel, "God is with us," spoken through the prophet many years ago. God was inviting Joseph to be an active part of God's plan by feeding, protecting, teaching, and raising a baby, Jesus. When he trusted in God, it happened through him.

Joseph's story reminds us that Jesus is the evidence of God's faithfulness in how God keeps the promise he made. Jesus is the revelation of God among us to speak loud and clear in human terms, "God is with us!"

As we consider our lives, each of us might have stories to share how God has been with us. Because of our stories in the past, we know God is with us today and will be with us tomorrow, even when we feel like God is absent or silent. This day let's stand firm on the promise of God and trust in the Lord with all our hearts whose master plan is much bigger than our best plan. Let's follow God's guidance corner to corner, trusting God is providing secret tips of life to lead us into the faithful journey as we continue to walk together in the way of love. Rev Ji Sun Yang, associate pastor at Haddonfield UMC

**Prayer:** God of hope and direction, we thank you for helping us navigate this life. We are most thankful for your gift of love and grace offered freely. Help to trust that you are with us. As we celebrate this week, we are forever grateful for your plans. Amen.



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*Medley: Emmanuel, Emmanuel  
Emmanuel, Emmanuel Emmanuel,  
Emmanuel Wonderful Counsellor  
Lord of Life, Lord of All  
He is the Prince of Peace, Mighty God,  
Holy One Emmanuel, Emmanuel*

Songwriters: Craig Smith  
Performed by Michael W Smith

#### **Reading Week 4**

December 22	Mat 1:18-25
December 23	Luke 1:26-38
December 24	Luke 1:39-56
December 25	Luke 2: 1-7
December 26	Luke 2: 8-12
December 27	Luke 2: 13-15
December 28	Luke 2: 15-20



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### Week 5: Go Tell It! | Proclamation

*In Jerusalem at the time, there was a man, Simeon by name, a good man, a man who lived in the prayerful expectancy of help for Israel. And the Holy Spirit was on him. The Holy Spirit had shown him that he would see the Messiah of God before he died. Led by the Spirit, he entered the Temple. As the parents of the child Jesus brought him in to carry out the rituals of the Law, Simeon took him into his arms and blessed God: God, you can now release your servant; release me in peace as you promised. With my own eyes I've seen your salvation; it's now out in the open for everyone to see...When they finished everything required by God in the Law, they returned to Galilee and their own town, Nazareth. There the child grew strong in body and wise in spirit. And the grace of God was on him. Luke 2:25-28, 39-40, The Message*

I imagine Mary and Joseph, still pondering and treasuring the events surrounding their first child's birth, were filled with a plethora of emotions as they journeyed together to the Temple to carry out the rituals of the Law. For those parents who have presented their child(ren) for baptism, you may relate. As the father of three, several colleagues continually remind me, God created and ordained the family before God created the church. For me, and especially during this holy season, these words of wisdom remind me of my first *calling*: to do my part to raise children that *grow strong in body, wise in spirit*, and may come to know, accept, and grow in the *grace of God that is upon them* (Luke 2:39-40). Whether parent, grandparent, neighbor, church member or prophet/pastor, this text provides fertile ground for contemplative thinking and action-oriented living as it relates to our responsibilities in nurturing the growth of our children and helping them one day profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

My wife and I recently decided to unplug the televisions in our home and limit device time, for a variety of reasons, including our desire to better strengthen mind, body and spirit of our children. We thought this experiment would unravel within 24 hours, but as of the time of this writing, we are at a week and counting. Speaking for me, in nurturing this new lifestyle, I have had to make intentional decisions to engage my children in more random fun activities. For example, moments of work are now interspersed with dance breaks. I will say, "Alexa, set a timer for 5 minutes", and then my daughter, Julia, says, "Alexa, play (insert favorite her song at the time)", and we randomly dance together. Of course, my twin boys, William and James, join the party and 5 minutes turns into an extended mini party with lots of laughter and exhaustion. Soon, they are once again creatively pretending with each other until the next activity, bath time, or family prayer time, I'm back to work, and a joyful peace is in the air.

I know that the television can't stay unplugged forever, but my prayerful hope is that, like Mary, Joseph and Jesus, when they returned to Galilee and their own town, Nazareth, that when Joyce, Julia, William, James and I *return to a new normal*, both parent and children can continue to grow strong in body and wise in spirit by the grace of God. With Christ, all things are possible! I invite you to consider these questions: What are the vices that are keeping you from fully engaging with the children in your world? What prevents you from taking (grand)children (neighbor's children) to church to receive a blessing? It's not yet lent, but heading into 2020, what can you resolve to do differently or to give up in order to help the hearts of children become opened to the love of Jesus Christ? *Rev. William Williams III, senior pastor Westfield UMC*

**Prayer:** Creative God, we thank you for the countless opportunities we have each day to live fully and joyfully. Help us to not lose the spirit of Christmas, but instead celebrate each day your presence with us. Amen.



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# SONGS OF THE SEASON

## Church (Take Me Back)

*There was a time that I swore I would never go back  
I was blind to the truth, didn't know what I had  
I was running, I was searching  
But every place I turned for healing  
Left me more broken than the last*

*Take me back  
To the place that feels like home  
To the people I can depend on  
To the faith that's in my bones  
Take me back  
To a preacher and a verse  
Where they've seen me at my worst  
To the love I had at first  
Oh, I want to go to church*

*Tried to walk on my own but I wound up lost  
Now I'm making my way to the foot of the cross  
It's not a trophy for the winners  
It's a shelter for the sinners  
And it's right where I belong*

*I want to go to church  
Oh, more than an obligation  
It's our foundation  
The family of God  
I know it's hard  
But we need each other  
We're sisters and brothers*

*Oh, I want to go, want to go, I want to go  
Oh, I want to go to church  
Oh, I want to go to church*

Songwriters: Bryan Fowler / Michael Cochran / Micah Kuiper  
Performed by Cochran and Company

## Reading Week 5

December 29	Luke 2: 21-24
December 30	Luke 2: 25-32
December 31	Luke 2: 33-35
January 1	Luke 2: 36-39
January 2	1 John 5: 1-11
January 3	Psalms 105
January 4	Romans 10: 1-13



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