2015 Advent Devotions

A Season of Hope in God
Psalm 42-43

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.
   My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and behold the face of God?
   My tears have been my food day and night,
   while people say to me continually, "Where is your God?"

These things I remember, as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.
Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?
   Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.

My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,
deep from Mount Mizar.
   Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts;
   all your waves and your billows have gone over me.
   By day the Lord commands his steadfast love,
   and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.

I say to God, my rock, "Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?"
   As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me,
   while they say to me continually, "Where is your God?"

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?
   Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.

Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people;
   from those who are deceitful and unjust deliver me!
For you are the God whom I take refuge; why have you cast me off?
Why must I walk about mournfully because of the oppression of the enemy?
   O send out your light and your truth; let them lead me;
   let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling.
   Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy;
   and I will praise you with the harp, O God, my God.

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?
   Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.
Psalm 42-43 and Advent

Psalm 42-43 is a prayer for healing, a lament, and as a lament it is the most common form of prayer within the Psalter. The writer prays for healing in preparation for a pilgrimage, and there are three stanzas with a refrain repeated three times.

The writer remembers being able to make this pilgrimage in the past (“These things I remember...how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God...”). The illness (“As with a deadly wound in my body...”) is prohibiting the individual to once again make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and is experiencing being challenged by others that the sickness is evidence that God has forsaken the sufferer (“My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, 'Where is your God?'”). Thus the prayer is a request that, by the healing of the disease (“Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause...deliver me!”), the psalmist may be vindicated as a righteous person and enabled to once again go to Jerusalem.

Advent is about God doing a new thing. During this season you’re being invited to imagine what God is doing in our midst and how God is inviting us to be a part of God’s hope, as we once again enter this season of preparation of reflecting on what God had done in the person of Jesus.

The notion of a Messiah (Christ in Greek) was not a new one, in fact it was a hope that had remained unfulfilled within the people of Israel ever since the time of David. The people of Israel were, when Jesus was born, what they had been for much of their lives: a small group of pious people dominated militarily and politically by a foreign power. The hope of the Jews was that the Messiah, God’s anointed One, would come with power to restore them, the people of God, to their rightful place of honor and importance.

What happened, of course, is far different. The Messiah did come, we who are Christians profess, but as a humble servant riding on a donkey rather than a triumphant general riding on a steed. The outcome notwithstanding, the notion that God would come in flesh, in person, is a notion that is truly radical—both in the modern sense of being outlandish and in the original sense of being truthful to the root of God. We take God’s presence in Jesus for granted, but if we reflect faithfully on the Gospel witness, we find that such an acceptance was far from universal or easy.
Like the background of Psalm 42-43, Advent is in many ways a pilgrimage, an annual trek for Christians in preparation for Christmas. We are not lamenting the inability to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for a festival, instead we are celebrating the opportunity to once again live into the hope that God offers in the gift of God’s son Jesus at Christmas.

During this Advent Season you’re being invited to live into hope. This is a very hopeful time in the life of our congregation! First Presbyterian Church of the Covenant has been on a trek, a pilgrimage, during much of 2015: discernment amidst the work of the mission study process in preparation for the election of a Pastor Nominating Committee to seek the next called and installed pastor of this congregation.

As a part of that mission study process, four biblical texts were identified as helping name and claim the future we believe we are being called into as a result of our discernment work: Jeremiah 29.1; Matthew 5.14-16; Mark 10.11-15; and Romans 12.9-13.

In this study, one of these texts is featured each week for each of the four weeks of Advent, and there are some discussion questions that you as an individual and perhaps with a larger group are invited to live into. In addition, there are contributions from members and friends of FPCC around the theme of "Hope". Thanks very much to those who contributed a thought on Hope!

Advent means “to come to”. What we’re being invited to do is to open our eyes and our ears, our heads and our hearts, to these texts and reflections that speak in some form or fashion to the hope that we have in God in the name of Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit during this season of Advent. Thank you for making and taking the time to listen as the Spirit seeks to lead us, as we seek to continue the work we have begun in the mission study to listen to the voice of God as God seeks to lead us in hope both in the present and into the future.

—Timm High
A LITURGY FOR THE ADVENT SEASON

Lighting Of The Advent Candle

Sing to the Lord a new song!
Sing to the Lord, all the earth!
Sing to the Lord! Bless the Lord’s name!
Share the news of the Lord’s saving work every single day!
We light and celebrate the candle of Hope...Peace...Joy...Love!

Advent Prayer

Lord, we all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities,
like the wind, take us away.
Yet, O LORD,
you are our Father;
we are the clay and you are our potter;
we are the work of your hand.
Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,
and do not remember iniquity forever.
Lord, hear our silent individual prayers...
Amen.
SUGGESTIONS FOR USING THIS ADVENT STUDY

Read the text for the week each and every day, for it’s important to read the texts more than once. You’re even invited to read them out loud (even if you’re all by yourself, don’t worry, God won’t be embarrassed!) as well as silently. Often the words “sound” differently when we speak them in addition to silently saying them. The liturgy for lighting the Advent Candles is designed to be used each week and the Advent Prayer each day. Both are found to the left.

After reading the text(s) each day, make a note of what strikes you about the text in that moment. It can be a word, a phrase, even a punctuation mark. Let this be an indication for you of the Spirit attending to you as you read and reflect. Use the margins or another piece of paper to make your notes.

Take time during each day to reflect on at least one of the questions and at least one of the thoughts on Hope that are posed regarding the texts. You are encouraged to attempt reflection on all of the questions and all of the thoughts at some point during the week and to even return to a question or thought in subsequent weeks if you find one particularly meaningful, stimulating, or even aggravating (all signs of the Spirit’s work with you!).

Then, do what you want as you see fit. These are suggestions and you’ll come to know what works best for you as you seek to live into the Spirit’s invitation to listen to God’s word and way using this resource during this season of Advent. If you find this challenging, please prayerfully stick with it as long as you can, and when and if you can’t, God will lead you to find hope in another resource of some kind.

May this season of Advent find you doing the best you can in all that you do, with all that you have, given God’s help, amidst the challenges and comforts that come your way as we reflect on Hope, the hope that God is calling us to.

Be Well... And Hopeful!
Saturday, November 28th and Sunday, November 29th

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT AND THE WEEK THAT FOLLOWS

This is Sunday, November 29th’s sermon text. It is suggested that you read it on Saturday, November 28th and again on Sunday, November 29th, working through the discussion questions throughout the week.

Jeremiah 29.1, 4-14

These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon...It said: Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf; for in its welfare you will find your welfare. For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophet and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the LORD.

For thus says the LORD: Only when Babylon’s seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.
Reflection/Discussion Questions

What do you think Jeremiah understands the LORD to say when he passes along these amongst God’s words: *Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease*?

Many of the members of FPCC do not live within the city of Erie but rather within another township within Erie County. And yet FPCC is located not only within the heart of the city of Erie but that the city of Erie is the heart of Erie County. What do you imagine that we might be called as a congregation to do/be in order to fulfill God’s commandment to: *seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare*?

What statement within this text gives you hope? What statement in this text do you think gives God hope?

*For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.* What would you imagine a future with hope that God expects to look like for FPCC?

*When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the LORD*...if you were to be asked, how would you recommend that we as a community of faith seek God “with all (our) heart?” What do you make of God’s invitation that we should search for God?
**Monday, November 30th**

We have begun the season of Advent, the four weeks leading up to Christmas. It is the more upbeat of the two seasons for penitence, the other being Lent. Both are periods of reflection and heart-searching, taking extra time to ask the Spirit to identify areas of darkness within us so that we may receive the Light of Christ and rejoice all the more on its culminating holiday.

As Christmas is the celebration of Emmanuel, God with us, Advent is a time to explore the parts of our lives and world where we feel God’s absence and desire for Him to show up. It arises from the experience of the Jews as they waited for over 400 years during the interim between hearing God through the prophets, and then hearing nothing until the birth of Christ. That is almost twice as long as the United States has been an established nation. Four centuries of silence...of seeming absence. Thankfully we know the end of the story and the coming of a Messiah that would change everything once and for all. A Messiah who did not disappoint even the highest hopes of His people. It is this realized hope that gives us the courage to face and confront the things in our lives that are not as they should be.

This year in particular it’s easy to see the darkness and sense of absence. Violent conflicts seem rampant around the world, and the division and pain of racism is very fresh in our national experience. It forces us to ask the question: has anything really changed? Can things really be better? Violence against women and sexual violence on our college campuses feels like another struggle that may never change. Where society has advanced in one area, we step back in another. There are also countless personal challenges that we each face, some known only to us. There may be rifts in relationships, financial anxiety and a cycle of debt, loneliness, depression, patterns of sin. We each likely have at least one area of life that feels desolate and cut off.

Advent allows us to be honest about these places of decay and the temptation to hopelessness. Isaiah 11:1 depicts Israel’s feeling of being a stump, a people cut off from growth and flourishing. A stump is not the picture of a bright future. But the kind of Messiah we know and anticipate can bring life from death. There is no area of the creation too lifeless for the power of God’s presence to resurrect. Just as the Israelites waited in 400 years of silence and received a Savior beyond their highest hopes, so we wait for Christ to continue to restore all areas of His creation.

This Advent, bring the most hopeless parts of your life and experience to Christ and ask Him to make Himself known in a way that you could never anticipate.

*O come, Desire of nations, bind, in one the hearts of all mankind; Bid Thou our sad divisions cease, And be Thyself our King of Peace. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.*

—Heather Strong Moore, Coalition for Christian Outreach and preached at FPCC in July, 2015 with husband Ivan
Hope is a feeling of expectation for a certain thing to happen and things are happening at First Presbyterian Church of the Covenant.

Our church has opened its doors to wonderful international Gannon students and I have seen in them the acceptance of the friendship we have offered and this has given me hope we can bridge the many misconceptions we have about each other.

I so enjoy sharing dinner each Wednesday night at Connections with students who are far from their homelands and are just wanting to feel the love of family and community. What fun it is to be able to share a meal and have conversation to help those struggling to learn our English language. I try to explain the many words that sound alike but are spelled differently and have different meanings such as flower and flour.

I so admire these students who come to the U.S. and have a year to learn English which includes spelling, printing, writing, comprehension and conversation, before they can begin their formal education classes. They show such courage and have outstanding hope that they can conquer their goal.

I have great hope as we reach out to be the Caring Church in the Heart of the City that our new friends will see Christ’s love through us.

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”
—Jeremiah 29.11

—Mary Concoby
Wednesday December 2nd

But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and the livestock that were with him in the ark, and he sent a wind over the earth, and the waters receded. —Genesis 8:1

While Noah followed God’s direction and prayed to him for guidance, he still experienced turmoil during his journey. Due to his faith and God’s unfailing love, Noah and the animals were kept safe during the flood.

When conflict and worries envelope us, we only need to pray for God’s help. At times, we might feel that the situation is not improving, but ultimately God is protecting us through the journey he has put us on. In the end, hope and trust in God through whatever may come will bring us closer to him.

Dear God, thank you for the experiences you bring upon us, for they help us to grow and better understand the love you show us.

—Mike & Amanda Glotzbach

Thursday, December 3rd

For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord. Plans to prosper you and not harm you. Plans to give you hope and a future. —Jeremiah 29:11

Hope.

One word with enormous possibilities.

Sometimes, hope scares me. It’s much easier to assume the worst and be pleasantly surprised when something good comes along. But God created us in his image. Like any parent, he wants what’s best for his children. How can we not have hope?

So, when life is getting the best of me, I breathe deep, count my blessings and let hope win over despair. I let go of believing in myself more than I believe in my creator. I pray. I may stumble and fall, but I try again the next day.

—Nancy Irwin
Friday, December 4th

“For I know the plan I have for you”, declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. “
—Jeremiah 29.11

I am a bit of a control freak! Just ask my family, and each one will concur. As I look back on my life, I wonder where that came from. Living in a small space with three other females? (We had moved in with my grandmother, and my mother's sister, when my parents split up). Having to share a room with my mother the entire time I lived there? As a youngster, feeling a sense of being slighted, when my father chose not to see me anymore? Who knows? As a young adult, when a feeling of being “at sea” came on me, (looking for something, yet not knowing what it was), I turned to the Lord for guidance.

God gave me hope that something good would happen. It meant giving up control – not such an easy feat for me! But then that something good happened! I met my husband, Dale – quite by chance. Here was a kind, loving and caring person who changed my life. To this day we still feel it was God’s plan for both of us!

For most of my life, I had a fear of general anesthesia, and so did everything to prevent having it (even having two surgeries with local anesthesia! Crazy!) But then, I had no choice several years ago. On the way to the hospital, I turned again to the Lord. I could feel his presence, and gave up control to Him. He gave me hope.

Along the way, I have walked alongside a couple of friends who have experienced a loss of one kind or another. They felt devastated, because life had dealt a blow, and there seemed to be little hope. Once again, I turned to the Lord for guidance, and there was the answer, “For I know the plans...” I shared it with my friends, and we all agreed that even in the midst of sorrow, God has a plan. It is not always easy to see it, especially when things look bleak. The encouragement and hope one can garner from this verse is so uplifting.

In this Advent season, we are again reminded of God’s plan, to send His Son to earth on that Holy night. Jesus came to teach us the goodness of loving one another, to wrap His arms around us when things are not going as WE planned, to give us peace in the midst of pain, and to give us hope. He reminds us of the plan that He has for our lives. To God be the glory!

—Sheila Sweet
SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT AND THE WEEK THATFollowS

This is Sunday, December 6th’s sermon text.
It is suggested that you read it on Saturday, December 5th
and again on Sunday, December 6th,
working through the discussion questions throughout the week.

Matthew 5.14-16

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

Reflection/Discussion Questions

Jesus uses some powerful (no pun intended) imagery here. Jesus lived in a world that was dominated by natural light and diminished (in terms of productivity) outside of daylight, a condition that not many of us have ever experienced for any length of time. How might someone describe you in terms of being a “light”?

What do you think Jesus means when he says “You are the light of the world?” Is he speaking to an individual, to the faithful as a community, both?

What would be included in your good works as an individual that others could see?
What would be included in FPCC’s good works as a community that others could see?

What is a good work of yours that you would wish to have but do not yet have?

What is a good work of FPCC that you wish we would have but do not yet have?

While neither FPCC nor Erie are “built on a hill”, both are readily visible from a number of vantage points. Have you ever glimpsed Erie from the bay or from Lake Erie or from an airplane? What do you remember struck you about what you saw?

What might our neighbors think when they see FPCC’s bell tower illuminated with blue lights after dark?

Given the size of FPCC’s building, it’s hard to imagine it being “hidden” from view. How do you think we could as a faith community become even more visible in this community beyond the impressiveness of our building? What do you believe God is calling us to do in order to live into the hope of God’s future for us as a faith community?
Monday, December 7th

The memorization of this verse has helped me stand on God’s firm foundation through all of the ups and downs of this life.

Psalm 73.23-26 (NIV)

23 Yet I am always with you;
   You hold me by my right hand.

   God fulfilled his promise to always be with us through the birth and death of his son, Immanuel, truly God With Us. What hope for the world! What hope for me!

24 You guide me with your counsel,
   And afterward you will take me into glory.

   Lord, you know every second of my life—the sins, the joys, the trials, the smooth ways. Through it all, you are there to guide and love me, all with the promise of being in glory with you. What a promise! What a hope!

25 Whom have I in heaven but you?
   And earth has nothing I desire besides you.

   A reminder that the things I experience and have on earth are temporary and you are the true treasure.

26 My flesh and my heart may fail,
   But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

   Hope. Eternal. For all who believe and follow.

Thank you for your promise, Lord, it is the hope that sustains us.

—Stephanie Rose Briggs
Tuesday, December 8th

What is Hope?

Hope is a feeling of expectation; it is an emotion that ensures our trust in the manifestation of things desired. The prophet Jeremiah makes it clear in his address to God in Jeremiah 14:22 “God, our hope is in you and the Lord of Israel is our hope.”

Even in this day and time, we the people of God must forever hope, trust in and obey the Lord. There are times when this can become hard. With obstacles, struggles, hurt and pain, lost ones you loved so dear it can feel at times all hope is lost.

Yet where there is no hope, no trust or expectation, we must look to the word of God. God will turn things around. For our hope was born in a manger, hope ministered to a hopeless world for three years. Hope was rejected, Hope was despised, and Hope was crucified. But yet Hope rose up on the third day with all power in his hands.

Brothers and sisters, we must remember that Hope and Hope alone died for our sins. Therefore even through our individual pain and life’s trials we must remain confident in our Hope. Psalms 40 says “I waited patiently on the Lord and I did not lose hope.”

As we journey through Advent, let us forever hope for our family and friends we love so dearly. Let us hope for our country, leadership and even as we intercede for other countries to find hope and peace. Let us continue to hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

For some trust in chariots, and some in horses, but we will remember the name of the Lord our God. —Psalms 20:7

Remember hope, the name of the Lord is a strong tower the righteous run into it and are safe. Be of good courage and he shall strengthen your heart, and all ye that hope in the Lord. —Psalms 31:24

—Jackie Jones, Covenant Connections Cook
**Wednesday, December 9th**

Grace and peace in the name of our Lord Jesus, Saviour and Redeemer be with you. May this Advent Season be turning our hearts and minds ever more toward the precious gift of God’s Son to the world. May the light of Christ shine in every dark corner of this challenging world.

Another favorite season has come our way as we celebrate the hope and advent of the birth of the Messiah. We need to know who this person was and is:

“He grew up in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He worked in a carpenter shop until he was thirty, and then for three years he was an itinerant preacher.

He never owned a home. He never had a family. He never went to college. He never travelled more than two hundred miles from where he was born. He didn’t do any of the things usually associated with greatness. He had no credentials but himself.

While he was still a young man the tide of public opinion turned against him. His friends ran away from him. He was turned over to his enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. While he was dying his executioners gambled for the only piece of property he had on earth, his coat. When he was dead he was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.

We are now in the 21st century and all the armies that ever marched, and all the navies that ever sailed, and all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned—put together have not affected the life of men and women on this earth as much as this one solitary life.”

—“One Solitary Life”, Dr. James Allan Francis

*Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.* —Luke 2.11-12.

This baby born in a stable at Bethlehem is a multiple sign: a sign of God’s nature, God’s willingness to translate himself into something that people can understand. And it’s a sign for the shepherds to see how God will reveal his glory in the world. God will do glorious things through a saviour who is born, the long-awaited Messiah. God will do things through a man that people can see, touch, speak to, and put to death.
St. Irenaeus, a second-century bishop, said that the glory of God is man and woman fully alive. Jesus is the man above all who is fully alive, alive as God created all his people to be. He is the sign of what God’s glory is truly like, a glory that is willing to die if that is the only way he can deliver human beings from the bondage of sin.

It is a glory that does not come with triumphalist armies to destroy its enemies, but overcomes evil in the quietness of a tomb and the stillness of death, and in resurrection is revealed first to a woman in a garden. The shepherds glimpsed the glory of the Lord in a vision of angels, a new-born baby with his parents in a stable.

We have a glimpse, this Advent, of some of the efforts that God makes to communicate with people in ways suited to their human nature. These efforts are embedded in the birth narrative of Jesus. But for all of God’s work in revealing himself to his chosen people across the centuries, they still, in the end, could not hear his words. They did not recognise the longed-for Messiah, perhaps because he was God, not a warrior-king who would deliver the Jewish nation from its oppressors. Even in translation, they failed to understand what God was saying to them.

But it is not just the Jews who failed to recognise God’s word made flesh. We all fail to listen to God, to recognise when he speaks to us, especially if he uses rather unexpected means of communication. Do we recognise the voice of God if the word of encouragement, guidance, judgement, love comes to us from someone we dislike, from a child or a subordinate, or someone who isn’t a Christian?

Today, commit yourself to receiving God in whatever way he comes to you, so that he can never say of you that ‘I came to you as one of my own, but you did not receive me’.

Our resolution in the coming year should include peace within us and for all, humility to God and other fellow human beings, respect to ourselves and other people, commitment to duty, and above all love to our nation, our family, our friends, even to our enemies.

May you be blessed in the coming year and be a blessing to many others.

SHALOM! AMEN!

Thursday, December 10th

For whatever was written in earlier times, that through perseverance and encouragement of the scriptures we might find hope.
—Romans 15.4

Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing that you many abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.
—Romans 15.13

The Apostle Paul writes this letter to the Romans on his way to Spain. He has not been in Rome, but it is his hope to go there that is his reason for writing to the church in Rome. As I look back over the years of my life, I have always been involved in studying scripture and feel blessed that we have the Bible for our instruction. Wisdom, history, the people of the book, all have influenced how I think and believe—a cornerstone to my faith.

Joan Brown Campbell, former director of religion at Chautauqua, has written a marvelous book entitled “Living into Hope: A Call to Spiritual Action for Such a Time as This”. In it she says that hope is born in the eye of a storm and that now after 2000 years we join the women who sought Jesus in the empty tomb. The women spread the story after fear and trembling and now we possess the story for eternity.

—Carol Brueckman
Friday, December 11th

Then they said, “Come, let’s make plans against Jeremiah; for the teaching of the law by the priest will not cease, nor will counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet. Come, let us attack him with our tongue and pay no attention to anything he says.”
—Jeremiah 18.18

But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel.”
—Matthew 1.20-23

The prophetic voice of the church is sometimes seen as a threat to those in power. For marginalised people this voice is a source of hope. The churches’ prophetic voice is firmly rooted in the Godly principle of justice to all. The prophetic church does not hesitate to ask difficult questions regarding unjust enrichment, the wide economic gap between the rich and the poor, corruption and the inadequate delivery of basic services. This voice causes discomfort to those who prevent meaningful transformation and the resurrection of the poor.

To manage this discomfort, the powerful political establishment ridicules this prophetic voice or ignores it altogether. It also leads to the establishment aligning themselves with those in the church who are intimidated by political power. The political powers then create the impression that they have the support of the church and that the prophetic voice of the church lacks credibility.

The prophet Jeremiah warns against such a stand. The prophetic voice of the church can and will never be silenced. Jeremiah’s own history and the prophetic voice of the church during apartheid South Africa serve as examples. Let us never be fooled into believing that the credibility of those sections in the church who succumb to power will survive the test of time.

During advent we are reflecting on the birth of the world’s most powerful prophet ever – Jesus Christ. Let us in the church follow his example of speaking truth to power and bring hope to those in the world who do not have hope anymore.

Teach me, O God, to live in solidarity with those who suffer and not to lose hope in the daily heaven of freedom.

—Dr. Deon Snyman is an ordained minister of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa and is the current CEO of the Restitution Foundation in Cape Town, South Africa. He was also a visiting Presbyterian Peacemaker who spoke in Gannon and Mercyhurst classes during October, 2015 thanks to the Lake Erie Presbytery and FPCC.
Saturday, December 12th and Sunday, December 13th

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT AND THE WEEK THAT FOLLOWS

This is Sunday, December 13th’s sermon text.
It is suggested that you read it on Saturday, December 12th and again on Sunday, December 13th, working through the discussion questions throughout the week.

Mark 10.11-15

People were bringing children to Jesus in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Jesus is strongly going against the tradition with this teaching. Children in Jesus’ day were considered burdens, not necessarily blessings (although having many children was considered a blessing from God). The attitude regarding and approach to children was completely the opposite of ours today. The disciples believe that they’re doing the right thing in “speaking sternly to (the people bringing the children).” But Jesus has a strong —“indignant”—reaction and teaches the adults within hearing that they are to understand how the kingdom of God is to be received as a child receives a gift that is offered.
Reflection/Discussion Questions

Why do you think this text is so hard to understand, to believe?

Which character do you most identify with in this text? How do you identify with that character?

Given that this teaching is as much about the Kingdom of God as it is about children, what do you think Jesus is saying about God? What is it that you believe God wants us to hear in relation to the Kingdom?

How does Jesus reframe the issue? How does his reframing speak to hope?

Who is someone in your family of origin who was always welcoming of children? What did they do to welcome children?

Who is someone in your family of origin who was not generally welcoming of children? What did they do to express their unwelcome?

How do you experience FPCC as a welcoming of children community? What could we improve on?

How do you experience FPCC as an unwelcoming of children community? What could we improve on?
Monday, December 14th

Christmas again and it sucks not having family; that whole outsider feeling

but the wonder remains and I read comforting things like Henry Van Dyke’s *The Other Wise Man* and (from when most people couldn’t read!)...

*The Nicene Creed*

“maker of heaven and earth”

what an understatement with today’s science arguing that a cell phone is something to have faith in

in creation and order
we would seem to be an empire of magicians
to a citizen of the Roman empire
and yet those same simpler people packaged wonder for us

...go look up the Nicene Creed, read it
say the words out loud
a very god of very god, maker of all things, visible and invisible packaged
came down from heaven for us mankind,
icarnate by the holy spirit and made man
an awe-filled package
delivered in baby Jesus

—Rob Baker
So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. —2 Corinthians 5.16-21

I live and work with college students. Part of my job is listening to the many hardships of college life as well as seeing the brokenness of the collegiate education system. I’ve heard everything from problems with the work load that the students are given, to disrespectful professors, to the problems and stresses with financial aid. I have seen many of these collegiate trials weight students down and bring them to tears, and as I walk with my students, it can become overwhelming for me as well.

What brings my students and me hope is that God has called us and equipped us, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to be a part His master plan to reconcile all things back to him. And although this work of reconciliation is long, hard and tiresome, we wait with great anticipation for the day when all things including college institutions will operate to bring God the glory.

As we remember the hopeful and waiting hearts of God’s people for a savior during this Advent Season, may we also remember that we are a waiting people for the return of our reconciling King.

God, we wait with our feet on the ground, hands reaching out towards one another and eyes to the sky for the coming of the risen king. Amen.

—Natalie R. Harvey, Campus Minister at Edinboro University, Director of The Potter’s House and leader for Summer 2015 “Beach Project” at the Kirk House
Wednesday, December 16th

I have experienced the blessing of hope while gathering these devotions from church members and others who shared ministry with us in 2015. When you work on a church staff, you see behind the "How are you? Fine, thank you." veil; you know that the struggle is real in people's lives. Many of the devotions contained in this Advent booklet were written by those who recently experienced/experiencing bleak situations (physical, family, financial, relationship, spiritual, addiction, grief, anxiety, loss, loneliness) yet they still have hope. This, in turn, gives me hope.

I fill with hope when I "hear" the words contained here in *A Season of Hope in God*. Timm asked recently in worship, "Why do you come to this church?" How did you answer? I come because I need to be immersed in the hope of my church family. When the struggle is real in my life as it is now with Rhonda’s cancer, I need to hear you sing *Great is Thy Faithfulness* and *God of the Sparrow, Here I am Lord* and *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel* like you mean it. I need to hear you pray behind me and beside me. I need to see you take risks of faith, and serve others boldly in Jesus’ name and hear how this make a difference in your life.

June and July, 2015 provided some of my favorite worship services at FPCC. We hosted the "Beach Project" with 22 college students living in the Kirk House for intense discipleship training. They sang and prayed with us in worship, plus we got to hear what God was teaching them. I was moved by the candor and insights that were shared. Such vulnerability! Often there was something mentioned which stirred hope within me. I pray this booklet will do this for you.

To me, Advent and Christmas overflow with hope. There is hope for a hurting world when the God of love and mercy enters in. Jesus shows us the way God loves us. This encourages me to receive the love gift of Jesus, and to share it with those around me, family, friends and strangers.

Hope is contagious. My housemate Abdullah from Iraq was inspired by the hope he experiences at FPCC to pack two Operation Christmas Child shoeboxes (with hope somehow they would be delivered to children in Iraq!). A congregation member heard of a financial need for dental care for a student and anonymously produced an envelope of cash which prompted tears of gratitude from the recipient. I witness such encounters at FPCC all the time as we share our hope with others.

One of my favorite songs of the season has become *Welcome to Our World* by Chris Rice. It offers a thoughtful reflection on welcoming strangers, our need for hope, what God offers the world through Jesus. It’s my prayer, and it stands alone as tomorrow’s devotion. Look up the video on YouTube. May it grow your hope this Advent and Christmas!

—Seph Kumer
Thursday, December 17th

Tears are falling
Hearts are breaking
How we need to hear from God
You've been promised
We've been waiting
Welcome, Holy Child
Welcome, Holy Child
Hope that You don't
Mind our manger
How I wish we would have known
But long awaited
Holy Stranger
Make Yourself at home
Please make Yourself at home

Bring Your peace
Into our violence
Bid our hungry souls be filled
Word now breaking
Heaven's silence
Welcome to our world
Welcome to our world
Fragile finger
Sent to heal us
Tender brow prepared for thorn
Tiny heart
Whose blood will save us
Unto us is born
Unto us is born

—Welcome to Our World, Chris Rice songwriter

Friday, December 18th

But I trust in your unfailing love, my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the LORD’s praise, for he has been good to me. —Psalm 13.5-6

I find hope in this passage because it shows that I can trust in God’s love and no matter what happens, God will always love us. It also reminds me of the fact that through my whole life, God has been good to me and will continue to be in the future, which gives me hope.

Dear Lord, please give me the strength to trust in your love and to help me find hope in all of your creation around me.

—Haley Fabich
Saturday December 19th and Sunday, December 20th

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT AND THE DAYS THAT FOLLOW

This is Sunday, December 20th’s sermon text.
It is suggested that you read it on Saturday, December 19th
and again on Sunday, December 20th,
working through the discussion questions throughout the week.

Romans 12.9-13

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one
another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do
not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be pa-
tient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the
saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Romans Chapters 1-11 contain the theological basis for the letter
from Paul to the church at Rome. Chapters 12 and following contain the
ethical basis (the therefore, or “so what”) for the letter from Paul to the
church at Rome. This is an unusual letter for Paul, given that it is written
to the community ahead of his visit. Persons there know him, but he has
not had any personal contact with the nascent Christian community in
Rome. It makes the letter all the more unusual given that it is the longest
of his correspondences that we have. Romans is the most complete shar-
ing of Paul’s theology and his ethics of any of the other work of his that we
have access to. It has been a thoughtful and faithful document for the
Church for a couple of millennia.

Reflection/Discussion Questions

What is the theme of the first sentence?

What is the theme of the second sentence?

What is the theme of the third sentence?
What is the theme of the fourth sentence?

Circle the verbs in the text. What do they say to you? How do you hear them?

Leading up to the directive to “extend hospitality to strangers”, there are a number of other directives. Which ones speak to you?

How does “persevere in prayer” prepare one to extend hospitality to strangers?

What is a time in your life when you have been a stranger? Someone else you know? What helped contribute to the experience of being a stranger?

One of the major commitments the Session has made is to hospitality. How do you define hospitality? How do you experience us offering it to strangers?

Who is someone in our congregation whom you experience as being “ardent in spirit?”
Monday, December 21st

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.
—Romans 15.13

Several years ago when my friend’s brother had cancer, we talked a lot about hope. That inspired me to find the Bible verses that relate to hope. This one in particular spoke to me with its image of hope spilling over from our lives to reach others, especially to those who feel hopeless. I’ve since memorized it and I frequently use it as a prayer.

Our Lord is a God of hope, and when we put our trust and faith in Him, He fills us with joy and peace. Then by the power of the Holy Spirit, we overflow with hope! This is our witness to a hurting world.

Heavenly Father, you are our hope. As we trust in You, may we overflow with joy and peace and hope by the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

—Nancy Nardo

Tuesday, December 22nd

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. —Psalm 19.1

When I was a senior in college, I went on a kayaking trip. I was under the impression that we would kayak for ten minutes then spend the rest of time sun bathing on a remote island in the Gulf. Boy, was I wrong.

After kayaking for 10 miles and the loss of feeling in my limbs, we made it as it was getting dark. Someone began to read Psalm 19. That was when I looked up and saw the night sky. I’ve seen stars, but never like this. Life, prior to this trip, had been chaos and felt out of control. But looking up at God’s creation gave me hope.

The Lord placed each star exactly where they are supposed to be. God’s handiwork can be subtle, but there is nothing subtle about the majesty of the night sky. God retains total control over everything. This is the God who tells you that nothing, in all the universe, can come between His love for you. This is the God who made stars millions of light-years away, but who is near you right now, near enough to see your face and hear your voice.

—Abby Blankenship, Kirk House Director
Wednesday, December 23rd

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God. —Psalms 146.5

After Jacob wrestled with God, he was transformed. Things began to be better for him. He began to be happier, living not just in the flesh, but the spirit. God changed his name to Israel.

Jacob’s experience is like ours. When we are transformed through a relationship with God through Jesus Christ we gravitate and elevate to our True identity. The Holy Spirit wakes us up to the Truth that we are the sons and daughters of the Living God. This gives me great hope. I want my hope to be in God and God only.

—Kevin Stevenson, Covenant Connections Cook

Thursday, December 24th

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. —1 Peter 1.3-5

Taking a step back to look at current events in our world, it seems soul wrenching and difficult. Life doesn’t seem fair. It makes me mad and upset that the brokenness of our world hasn’t ended yet. It makes me sit and wonder, "How long, O Lord, until it ends!"

But there’s hope. Now, hope isn’t just a good idea or wishful thinking. Hope has certainty. Hope has depth. Hope gives life! In 1 Peter, we are reminded that through God’s mercy, our world will not always be like this. So, in the meantime of this advent of the coming Messiah, eagerly waiting for our hope to be our present reality, I will rejoice the more gladly that God is on his way!

Dear Father, may it be here as it is in heaven. Amen

—Geraud Brumfield
CCO Campus Minister at Clarion University
and leader for Summer 2015 “Beach Project” at the Kirk House
It is suggested that you read these texts and work through the discussion questions on Christmas Day, December 25th, and throughout the Season of Christmas.

**John 1.1-18**

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave the power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’”) From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.
Luke 2.1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee in Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

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

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.
In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

The text from John 1 is referred to by scholars as “The Prologue” of John. It is in essence, John’s birth narrative, and the initial words “in the beginning” are written to intentionally remind one of Genesis, as John seeks to not only state a new beginning, but a connection of this new beginning with the beginning that is recorded in Genesis. What does John credit Jesus with as “the Word” in this opening paragraph? Of all of the aspects of Genesis 1, what does John highlight? If “without him not one thing came into being”, then is it possible that any one person/thing cannot not be of God? How is this a message of hope?

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth...From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.

The phrase “lived among us” in Greek literally means “pitched his tent”. What does it mean for you to believe that God became flesh and dwelt/lived/”pitched his tent” among humankind? What does that say about God? What does that say about the Son of God? What does Jesus, this one whose birth we celebrate once again in Christmas, share with us as human beings as a result of “becoming flesh”? What challenges of ours does it make it easier for him to understand, do you think, having been human himself? What does “grace and truth”, which has come through Jesus Christ, mean to you? What does it mean for you that “to see Jesus” is to know God? How does this text speak to you of God’s hope for the world? For you?
In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

“In those days...” What days, one might ask. What about these days? At some point in the future, someone will write about what God was doing in “these days” as “those days”. What do you think persons in the future will find to write about FPCC that was hopeful, that was faithful?

Note what is not mentioned amidst all of the detail: the child is not yet named. We know this story so well that it puts us at a bit of a disadvantage: we fill in a name when Luke has not yet shared the name, we focus more on there being “no place for them in the inn” more than the child being “laid in a manger”, and we focus on the story as a miracle of God without fully appreciating how this miracle, a word which means something extraordinary, takes place amidst the ordinary details of life: amidst this registration, there is another person, an extraordinary person to be sure, to be registered in this city of a famous, faithful person.

Who are persons who are well-known in your family? Who helped them to become the person they turned out to be? What privilege do you believe we have as a faith community to assist in the development of children who might someday be well known?
Advent Events

Wednesday, December 2nd
5:15 p.m.  Hanging of the Greens

Sunday, December 6th
8:30 a.m. & 11:00 a.m.  Worship with Communion

Sunday, December 13th
6:00 p.m.  Christmas With First Covenant

Sunday, December 20th
10:00 a.m. (One worship service only)
Children's Christmas Pageant

Thursday, December 24th
7:00 p.m.  Christmas Eve Candlelight Service

Wednesday, December 30th
Return of "Our Neighbors' Place" Shelter