

*The*  
**House**  
*of* **Christmas**

The Advent Reader • Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church

2023



# The House of Christmas

We are so pleased to present you with our 2023 Advent Reader!

We hope these daily devotions can help to tune your spirit to the Advent season. We turn to our scripture, our tradition, and each other to make meaning of our lives and to orient ourselves in the dark. In the midst of all this hurting world holds, whether you're overwhelmed or grieving, tender or tentative in hope, there is room for you here.

As each day stretches toward the year's darkest night, we are met in the waiting by the candles of Advent. We light them slowly, just one week at a time. Do take this moment as intended, to slow down and settle into each week's action, each week's command. Hope. Peace. Joy. Love. With these we mark the coming light of Christ, who taught us ways to live out these four pillars of God's presence in our world.

And as we wait, our scripture ushers us into the homes of prophets looking for the Lord, those who look together for signs of Christ's light coming over the horizon. We look in the temple for the sign of the Messiah. We dwell with Mary as she carries Jesus to his birth. We wait for the lowly stable to become the house of the Lord. And we mirror this in the transformation we make of our homes. The wreaths we form to hold our advent candles. The leaf we put in the table to host a Christmas meal. The ways we form community through the home we make at church.

In many ways, this waiting is the touchstone of our faith: we wait through Christ's time entombed for the resurrection we have not yet seen. We wait, in the moment between the blessing and the breaking of the bread. The presence of Christ is the already and not yet of our faith. This is Advent.

Join us as we still our rushing selves through this waiting. Let it reorient our time towards each other, trusting that we are not alone when darkness falls, that the coming light on the horizon will be witnessed in each other.

As you note the dates of these selections, ponder what was happening in the world when these sermons were preached, and take heart from the truth that the church has faithfully observed the season of Advent through many perilous times. This is our calling. That, in spite of the darkness we dwell in, we make our way by lighting the candles each week, calling forth the lengthening light in our actions and our community.

The Rev. Natalie Owens-Pike  
*Director of Ministry to the Online Campus*



Sunday, December 3

## “I WILL LIGHT THE CANDLES THIS CHRISTMAS”

I will light Candles this Christmas,  
Candles of joy despite all the sadness,  
Candles of hope where despair keeps watch,  
Candles of courage for fears ever present,  
Candles of peace for tempest-tossed days,  
Candles of grace to ease heavy burdens,  
Candles of love to inspire all my living,  
Candles that will burn all year long.

Howard Thurman

## Monday, December 4 “COME DOWN”

O, that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence. Isaiah 64:1

Waiting... In a word, that is what Advent is about. It is a season set aside for studying the horizon, waiting for God to show up. Of course, that makes it an especially difficult season for us. We are not very good at waiting—not in this fast-paced, results-now culture of ours. In fact, most of us are not even sure that patience still counts as a virtue.

In all of this, we share a connection with the prophet Isaiah. “Where are you?” Isaiah asks. “God, if you are on the job, why are the Israelite people buffeted by war? Why has our beloved temple been destroyed? Why are you nowhere to be seen when everything is in such a mess?” The months of agonized waiting finally escape in the cry that begins our passage.

At the beginning of Advent, this ancient cry for help reminds us of a sometimes painful truth. We do not possess God. We worship that which is beyond our control. We stand watch, shouting out for God, hoping to see the Holy One appear. In starting Advent off with the words of the prophet, we are reminded that the people of God exist as a community that waits. On behalf of the world, the church scans the horizon, holding its breath, waiting, waiting, waiting for God to show up.

The Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston

Tuesday, December 5  
**REPENTANCE CAN'T WAIT**

Sometimes,  
When the sky is still dark,  
I slip sock feet into tennis shoes and go for  
a walk.  
Step by step  
I ask my deepest questions,  
While the sky lets go of its deepest dark blue.  
Am I doing enough?  
Ink to indigo.  
Does my brother know how much I love him?  
Indigo to navy.  
Will my friends keep showing up?  
Navy to royal blue.  
Will we ever know peace?  
Royal blue to gold.  
And after a while, my pilgrimage must end,  
So I turn apologetic feet toward home  
And walk my repentance back toward the sun.  
And once again, while I stand in sock feet and  
tennis shoes,  
God takes my breath away.  
For once again,  
The sky's deepest void is not a watercolor  
of light.  
And I am reminded  
That like the sky,  
God touches everything.  
And I am reminded,  
That like the sky,  
Nothing is so broken that it can't be  
painted gold.  
In the morning light, there is peace.

The Rev. Sarah A. Speed

Wednesday, December 6  
**THE WORD BECAME FLESH**

Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.  
Hebrews 2:17-18

During Advent, we talk about the anticipation of Jesus's arrival, our Emmanuel, a God who is with us. In Hebrews 2, the author writes that in Christ, God indeed became one of us, in human form—and that in this baby, God chose to break into the world and become someone who bleeds as we do, who feels like we do, and who is not ashamed to call us his siblings. Think about how huge this is. The creator of the universe has seen how humans have treated each other, how they have continually messed up, and still chooses to come in the form of a human, because God loves people.

My mother is extremely close with her sisters. There are six sisters, all Guatemalan immigrants who now live in the greater Los Angeles area. They do not always get along; they do not always agree; and yet they truly love each other. The six of them, plus my grandma, get together many times throughout the year to share a meal and then pray for what seems like hours. They are not ashamed to call each other sisters.

When I read this passage and see that Jesus, God incarnate, calls us siblings, I cannot help but feel humbled that Jesus cares for me even more than my mom and her sisters care for each other. In this Christmas season, we rejoice that God became human, like us, out of love. These verses also remind us that suffering exists in this cold and fallen world, and that we are not exempt. Diseases attack our bodies; friends betray us; governments oppress the vulnerable; trouble and difficulty come. But in the midst of all that, Jesus our sibling is with us.

The Rev. Werner Ramirez

Thursday, December 7  
**SURPRISE!**

But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Matthew 24:36-37

Matthew invokes the story of Noah's ark at the end of his gospel, telling of another apocalyptic, world-changing event that will come upon us like the flood in Noah's day: the coming of the Son of Man. And it will be a surprise. Even Jesus doesn't know what that day or hour will be. Most of us haven't built arks we can bring our families into for shelter from terrifying storms. And yet Matthew urges us to prepare, "for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

So, in this first week of Advent, how can we prepare for Christ to come again? In 13th-century England, a young priest named Richard humbly fulfilled his ordination vows after being elected bishop of Chichester. He walked through his diocese barefoot, confronted clerical abuses, insisted that priests perform sacraments without pay, and focused his ministry on preaching and teaching people of all classes. Richard of Chichester composed the following prayer, which has been passed down in varying forms through the centuries:

Thanks be to thee, my Lord Jesus Christ, for all the benefits thou hast given me, for all the pains and insults thou hast borne for me. O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother, may I know thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, and follow thee more nearly, day by day. Amen.

**The Rev. Kate Dunn**

Friday, December 8  
**WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?**

There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Luke 21:25-27

Welcome to Advent! Welcome to the waiting room. When and where have we waited? Doctor's offices. DMV. Test or application results. A response to a request. In nearly all cases, we do not wait just for the sake of waiting. There is something we are expecting, hoping to happen. In this season of anticipation, let's pause to ponder the curious concept of the end times. After all, in Advent, this person of Jesus, who came and will come back, is the person we are waiting for.

Whatever we might believe about the cosmic end times, I would suggest that we turn our attention to the times in our own lives when, in some symbolic way, we really felt that "this is the end." The time you brought home a "B" rather than an "A" on your report card. The time you got into an accident in the car you shouldn't have been driving. That time the person you thought loved you instead rejected you. The time you lost your job. That time you got caught lying.

In situations that seem like "the end," Jesus gives a message of hope. Later in Luke 21, He says, "Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man." Fear does not play into Jesus's plan. Rather He exhorts us to wait and pray. Anticipate the coming, especially during Advent, and draw on the strength that comes from God, not ourselves.

**The Rev. Dr. Jonah So**

Saturday, December 9

## THOSE WHO BRING LIGHT

Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” Luke 1:67, 76-79

While they rarely appear in nativity scenes, Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist, are part of the Christmas story. When John (who was “a baby” way before he was “the Baptist”) is born, his family’s neighbors are amazed. “What do you know, the elderly couple next door have brought a child into the world!” The neighbors also worry. They size up the child’s parents and ask, “What will become of this baby?” In the first chapter of Luke, Zechariah gives an answer: “John is the fulfillment of our dreams, and that’s not all,” he says. “This baby will proclaim God’s dreams to the world.”

He will give us all the gift of light.

In Scripture, the very first words uttered by God are “Let there be light.” Light is creation’s opening act. It marks the start of cosmic order. It is our blazing sun. It is a mammoth ball of plasma in which elements are fused—in which creation continues. There is at least one point on which the ancient Hebrews and modern physicists agree: We cannot talk about the beginning of the universe without first talking about light. To the people who populate the pages of the Good Book, light was important and powerful. It could save you. So, naturally, “light” entered the people’s poetry and their theology. “Your word,” says the psalmist, “is a lamp for my feet, a light for my path.”

What does Zechariah mean when he says that his son will bring light to the world? He gives voice to a precious dream—a vision so dear to the priest’s heart that he has spent his whole life afraid to say it aloud. The baby on his knee gives him courage: “By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us.” This Advent, I encourage you to bring the light.

The Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston

Sunday, December 10

## SPIRITUAL LAMAZE

“In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” Luke 1:39-42

Our scripture passage is the beginning of a wonderful story of spiritual preparation—“spiritual Lamaze,” if you will. It is a story of two unexpectedly pregnant women, Mary and Elizabeth, who come together for three months. The gospel writer Luke does not tell us what happens during this time. But I imagine that Mary and Elizabeth spent much time together, taking walks to the market, tending to their homes, talking about their hopes and fears. I imagine they spent many hours sharing and preparing for these births in their lives, as God wants us to prepare our hearts and souls for this impending birth into our lives at Christmas.

How can you bless others this Christmas? Is there someone you know who needs the soothing balm of a healing word? Someone who needs to hear that they are forgiven? Someone who needs to hear that you love them? Blessed are you among women. Blessed are you among men. Blessed is the fruit of your life. Like with Mary and Elizabeth, God is waiting for us to bring life and light to the world.

The Rev. Janice Smith Ammon

Monday, December 11  
**TARNISHED STARS**

God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree. Luke 1:51-52

War raged and human evil accelerated through the mind and inhumane orders of Adolf Hitler. In a prison not far away, Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached in Advent of Christ's humble origins and the sacrifice of his death. Bonhoeffer preached the Christ who toppled thrones and powers, and confounded brilliant Magi and hard-scrabble Shepherds alike. He preached the re-orienting love of Jesus, from cattle stall to cross. Bonhoeffer pointed a laser light upon the fact that God came, Emmanuel, and came for all; for the tattered body and for the tarnished soul.

Jesus came to us in a scruffy stable, accompanied by frightened shepherds rather than well-trained bodyguards. Welcomed by an elderly father rather than one young and ready to coach t-ball in the dust of Galilee. As Will Willimon has commented, "Isn't that just like God?"

With Christmas only inches away, we listen closely to Mary's song of trust and acknowledge that we are God's broken and beloved. Mary and her cousin Elizabeth were aware and willing to receive the holy predicaments offered by God; imperfect vessels made perfect for God's wild and holy purposes. Mary's song, "The Magnificat," is a tune that crescendos with boldness, with trust. God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree... Isn't that just like God?

God loves the tarnished and dented, the wild and the weary. "God in lowliness," Bonhoeffer wrote, "that is the revolutionary and timeless word of Advent."

**The Rev. Dr. Patricia M.B. Kitchen**

Tuesday, December 12  
**GOD'S FAMILY GATHERING**

In the days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." Isaiah 2:2-3

Isaiah describes a huge, diverse collection of people with one thing in common: They have gathered on a mountaintop to learn God's ways and then to walk in those ways. This "family" will be of one mind: They will seek the way of the Lord. Contrast this to the time and energy you and I spend trying to force our will upon our family and friends, because we are convinced our way is best.

God's family gathering offers a perpetual invitation to go up the mountain. This image is important, because sometimes we don't feel ready to respond to God's invitation, just as sometimes we wish we could pass on family gatherings when we're not in a place to pretend everything is okay. But rather than the arbitrary judgments handed down by us or by our relatives, God establishes rules based on love, compassion and tenderness for his children.

Imagine a world where we do not stand at the door and let people in based on our prejudices. Rather, God, who created and loves us, will be the one bringing the family together. This is the gathering we dream of. Advent allows us to await the day we can marvel at and celebrate our differences, rather than be divided by them.

**The Rev. Dr. Jonah So**

Wednesday, December 13

## JOSEPH AND THE ANGEL

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.” Matthew 1:20-21

In Matthew’s nativity story, Joseph is a man of no words; in fact, neither he nor Mary speak at all. But Joseph is a man of action: He plans, he resolves, he dreams, he hears an angel of the Lord, changes his mind, and obeys. He marries Mary, claims and adopts her son, bestows on the boy his own heritage, and as the angel commanded, names him Jesus. Joseph knew both fear and hope. And after his dream encounter with the angel of the Lord, he chose hope.

We know fear and hope, too. If there is any Advent message to glean from the story of Joseph’s dream encounter with the angel, it is this: Dare to commit, dare to trust, dare to throw your passion into your art and your work, dare to bring children into the world, dare to befriend, dare to love, dare to believe in the mystery of the incarnate presence of God being born anew, again and again, and dare to hope for the redemption and reconciliation of this troubled and good and beautiful world that God loves so very much.

The Rev. Kate Dunn

Thursday, December 14

## THERE IS ROOM

The world may feel like one long stretch of night,  
like an endless winter, or a hovering rain cloud.  
And life may feel like walking into the wind,  
an uphill climb in every direction,  
but we can still open the door.  
We can’t calm every storm,  
but we can turn on the porch lights.  
We can add chairs to the table.  
We can keep clean sheets on the guest bed,  
just in case.  
We can hold the elevator,  
and learn pronouns.  
We can tell stories of belonging,  
and take turns listening.  
We can learn each other’s names,  
and plant trees for our children.  
We can study privilege  
and advocate for mental health.  
We can insist,  
every single day,  
in a million different ways:  
there is room,  
there is room,  
there is room for you here.  
We can’t calm every storm,  
but we can turn on the porch lights.

The Rev. Sarah A. Speed



Friday, December 15

## A SHOOT OF HOPE

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding. Isaiah 11:1-2

In the eleventh chapter of Isaiah, the prophet writes to a people who are living on a landscape seemingly devoid of hope. The holy city of Jerusalem and the sacred temple where the Israelites had worshiped God for centuries now lay in rubble in a land occupied by foreign invaders. The Israelites themselves had been forced to relocate to an altogether foreign land where they struggled to make a new life amidst strangers who did not understand their ways or worship their God. Prejudice and greed were the order of the day.

Yet it was into this landscape that Isaiah brought a word from the Lord: “Do you see that stump of a tree sitting out there in the midst of the lava field?” he asks. “Look closely at it with the eyes of faith. For that stump is not the only reality. The miraculous, powerful, re-creating Spirit of God is also blowing here. And through that Spirit’s power, a small green shoot of hope will spring forth that will eventually become a great tree.”

**The Rev. Dr. Nora Tubbs Tisdale**

Saturday, December 16

## A PEACEABLE REVOLUTION

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Isaiah 11:6-7, 9

I believe that the Advent narrative follows from the moral encounter of Isaiah 11, prefaced in Isaiah 9: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” The God of furrowed brows and fire in the belly sent Jesus to this earth as savior and prophet of a revolutionary love. In fact, the more I researched Isaiah’s so-called “peaceable kingdom,” I realized it is a peaceable revolution—a revolution with legs, voice and a pulsing heart. When we pray, “thy kingdom come,” think what it could mean if we prayed, “thy revolution come, thy will be done on earth.”

The 2005 French film *Joyeux Noel* is based on the true story of the 1914 Christmas Eve truce in the trenches of World War I. That night, the music of “O Come, All Ye Faithful” led soldiers on both sides to emerge from their trenches to encounter their enemies, sharing family photos, candy, cigarettes, and a raucous soccer game. It was a peaceable revolution that lasted only a few hours, but it reshaped the remaining days of the soldiers’ lives.

To picture reality in another’s shoes requires holy imagination. It is counter-intuitive, like a Christmas Eve truce. Isaiah calls us into uncharted territory to walk in other people’s shoes; to learn the visceral language of empathy. As did the soldiers in 1914, we can emerge from safe trenches—spiritual, racial, emotional, political—where we have hunkered down. And, willing to take risks to exercise the muscle of love, we can help lead Isaiah’s peaceable revolution.

**The Rev. Dr. Patricia B. Kitchen**

Sunday, December 17

## CHRISTMAS AT OUR HOUSE

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. Luke 2:7

There's a good reason why our church asks children, and not their parents, to put on the Christmas pageant every year; to re-tell us, to re-teach us, to remind us of the story of Jesus' birth. I think it's because we want Christmas at our house to look like the very first Christmas there ever was.

Sure, our "house" is a massive historic building in the center of one of the biggest cities in the world and not a humble stable in Bethlehem. But if you look really closely, you will see that the nonstop chaos behind our perfectly executed pageant looks a lot like the nonstop drama surrounding the birth of our Savior. Despite the serene pictures in our minds and on our mantels of a cozy little stable with a cute little manger and fuzzy little farm animals, the original Christmas was not cozy or cute or fuzzy at all. It was crazy.

To clarify: Upon finding out from an angel that she is carrying the son of God, Mary, who is super-pregnant, and her fiancé, Joseph, have to go on a week-long donkey ride from Nazareth to Bethlehem. After they arrive, what's available isn't the quaint cottage of our imaginations, but a barn where animals sleep, eat, and do other natural things. On top of all that, Mary and Joseph's first visitors include renegade shepherds they have never met and foreign magi who apparently already know their son. The craziest part is that just one small thing was causing all this commotion: a helpless baby boy.

**The Rev. Dr. Charlene Han Powell**

Monday, December 18

## WHEN DISBELIEF IS GONE

I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord!" Psalm 122:1

The English poet Philip Larkin's 1955 poem "Church Going" describes his experience walking around an empty sanctuary during a cycling trip. The second stanza ends, "I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence, Reflect the place was not worth stopping for."

Sociologists connect the diminished role of local churches to a larger phenomenon: People are increasingly isolated from the communities in which they buy their groceries and walk their dogs. We don't know our neighbors. From its first verse, Psalm 122, a traditional Advent text, is about community. The psalmist is invited by a group of people to come to worship. Together, they pray for the peace of the nation and their city. The web of social connections in Jerusalem is anchored by the house of the Lord.

What happens when these places no longer exist? This is the question to which Larkin eventually turns, after wandering around the empty sanctuary and dropping a meager coin in its box. His conclusion: "It pleases me to stand in silence here; A serious house on serious earth it is." Larkin is right. Our society needs places like this—serious places. Serious, not because we are joyless or grim or do not enjoy a good laugh; no, serious because the hard work of peace—of loving our neighbors—depends on a place where wisdom and truth take center stage, a place where we can speak Christ's good news and remind each other what it means to be children of God.

**The Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston**

Tuesday, December 19

## PRAYER

Almighty and most merciful God, we acknowledge and confess that we have sinned against Thee in thought and word and deed; that we have not loved Thee with all our heart and soul, with all our mind and strength; and that we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We beseech Thee, O God, to be forgiving to what we have been, to help us amend what we are, and of Thy mercy to direct what we shall be, so that the love of goodness may ever be first in our hearts, and that we may follow in the steps of Jesus Christ our Lord.

The Rev. Dr. Kenneth O. Jones

Wednesday, December 20

## THE NIGHT GOD LOST THE WAY

“This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” Luke 2:12

On Christmas Eve, God deliberately lost his way in order to lose himself among us. God left the beaten broad road to journey to the place where men are. He came to earth in a back alley stable, where there is no road and no marker, in order that men might find him lost among them in their lostness.

This is the dynamic of Christmas. This is the appeal of Christmas along the glittering avenues that are so bright and gay. This is the secret throb of joy at Christmas. God deliberately lost himself amidst our lostness that we might find him, and in finding him think that we ourselves had made the discovery.

It is the manger aspect of Christmas, signifying that God lost himself in man's humiliation in order that he might come here among us. God emptied himself into this little child born of a country girl and a carpenter in a Bethlehem stable. In order that he might lose himself in the depths of humanity, he left the road of known success and came to us who have no road, so that we might be reconciled to God.

The Rev. Dr. Bryant Kirkland

Thursday, December 21

## “COME ON HOME”

We all know the feeling—  
the shaky ground,  
sinking sand,  
water-is-rising,  
sun-is-fading feeling  
that makes steady breathing  
an entire miracle,  
and holding back tears  
a marvel in and of itself.

And when those days come,  
I call my parents.  
And I call my church,  
and I call my friends,  
and they say in unison  
what God has said  
from the very beginning,  
which is, “Come on home.”

Is there anything more healing  
than an open door?  
If you're seeking sanctuary,  
if the waters are rising—  
listen.  
It may be hard to hear,  
But God is always saying,  
“Come on home.”

The Rev. Sarah A. Speed

Friday, December 22

## THE INNKEEPER'S LAMENT

And [Mary] 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.

Luke 2:7

Can you imagine being the innkeeper in the Nativity story? The wonderful Christian writer Frederick Buechner (who passed away in August at age 96) describes the plight of the innkeeper as "like being lost in a forest with a million trees, and each tree is something else to be done." With so many people traveling to Bethlehem because of the census, the inn had become impossible to manage, and Mary and Joseph were turned away. "You wait your whole life for something that is true to come," Buechner writes in the voice of the innkeeper. "All of us do. We wait for our destiny, for our joy, for our heart's desire. What can I tell you? When he came, I missed him."

The innkeeper laments missing this amazing event because of everything else that was going on. For Mary and Joseph, life was crazy, too. They were traveling to register for a census, and in the midst of their hectic life, the baby was born. God chose that precise moment to become a human being, coming down to meet the world exactly where it was.

My wish this Christmas is that all of us will slow down and meet Christ in the midst. May we experience Christ's love and grace with our families, with our friends, and even with the random stranger. May we know deep in our hearts that this Jesus, the very being of God, came down to earth in the form of a baby to liberate us and reconcile all things to God.

The Rev. Werner Ramirez

Saturday, December 23

## "THE HOUSE OF CHRISTMAS"

There fared a mother driven forth  
Out of an inn to roam;  
In the place where she was homeless  
All men are at home.  
The crazy stable close at hand,

With shaking timber and shifting sand,  
Grew a stronger thing to abide and stand  
Than the square stones of Rome.

For men are homesick in their homes,  
And strangers under the sun,  
And they lay on their heads in a foreign land  
Whenever the day is done.  
Here we have battle and blazing eyes,  
And chance and honour and high surprise,  
But our homes are under miraculous skies  
Where the yule tale was begun.

A Child in a foul stable,  
Where the beasts feed and foam;  
Only where He was homeless  
Are you and I at home;  
We have hands that fashion and heads that know,  
But our hearts we lost - how long ago!  
In a place no chart nor ship can show  
Under the sky's dome.

This world is wild as an old wives' tale,  
And strange the plain things are,  
The earth is enough and the air is enough  
For our wonder and our war;  
But our rest is as far as the fire-drake swings  
And our peace is put in impossible things  
Where clashed and thundered unthinkable wings  
Round an incredible star.

To an open house in the evening  
Home shall men come,  
To an older place than Eden  
And a taller town than Rome.  
To the end of the way of the wandering star,  
To the things that cannot be and that are,  
To the place where God was homeless  
And all men are at home.

G.K. Chesterton

Sunday, December 24  
**WAITING FOR IT ALL  
TO MAKE SENSE**

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. John 1:1

Advent is supposed to be a season of waiting. It is a time to slow our heart rates, our psychic churn, and our compulsion to answer the next email as fast as possible. It is a time to stare at the horizon on a crisp winter's night waiting for the deepest desires of our hearts.

Some wait to feel excited again—to feel the thrill of the lights and the tree and life itself. We wait for our fortunes to look up. Some wait for their health to improve. We wait for depression to lift. We wait for individuals—people we love beyond reason—to stop making destructive decisions. We wait for some acknowledgement—some sign—that we count, that we matter, that we are loved.

On Christmas Eve, especially, we clutch candles and wait in a darkened church because we know that the world needs saving, and because nothing that we have tried has come close to saving it or us. So we gather on the edge of Christmas to wait for God to appear. We wait to hear the announcement caroled by angels to the shepherds-in-the-fields-as-they-lay: “Unto you a child has been born in a stable in lowly Bethlehem.” This means that we are waiting for something totally absurd.

Would anyone blurt out: “I want the creator of the universe to show up as a poor child, conceived out of wedlock, and born in a Middle Eastern barn”? Honestly, if you were in heaven's design shop, would you draw up a plan for salvation like that? Life leaves us feeling awfully vulnerable. If we are going to be saved, we need a strong, durable, bulletproof figure.

Yet, here we are. Waiting for a baby. “The Word became flesh”—soft and small and vulnerable, with bones that can break and a brain that might bruise, with tiny quivering hands and tear ducts that work. This is the Savior God thinks we need.

**The Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston**

Monday, December 25  
**A CHRISTMAS PRAYER**

Almighty God who, by the birth of thy Son, has given us a great light to shine in our darkness, vouchsafe unto us now the precious gift of faith whereby we may know that the Son of God is come.

We thank thee that Mary and Joseph were guided to the town of Bethlehem, reminding us of thy providence that watches over us.

We thank thee that our savior lay a helpless infant cradled in a manger, that we may realize his human kinship with us.

We thank thee that the revelation of his Advent was made to humble shepherds watching over their flock by night, that amid our daily tasks we may ever be alert to the revelation of thy presence.

We thank thee that he was born in poverty, that we may know that none of thy children is ever outside the circle of thy compassion and love.

We thank thee that at Christmas, wherever there are hearts willing to receive him, the Christ child comes to dwell.

Take from us all narrow and bitter thoughts, all resentments and ill will, all selfish forgetfulness of the needs of others, that we may enter thy kingdom as a little child.

In keeping Christmas in the spirit of love, may we find that we have kept Christ—and are kept of him. In his blessed name we pray. Amen.

**The Rev. Dr. John Sutherland Bonnell**

## CONTRIBUTING PASTORS

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## POETRY

G.K. Chesterton | *May 29, 1874 – June 14, 1936*

The Rev. Sarah A. Speed

Howard Thurman | *November 18, 1899 – April 10, 1981*

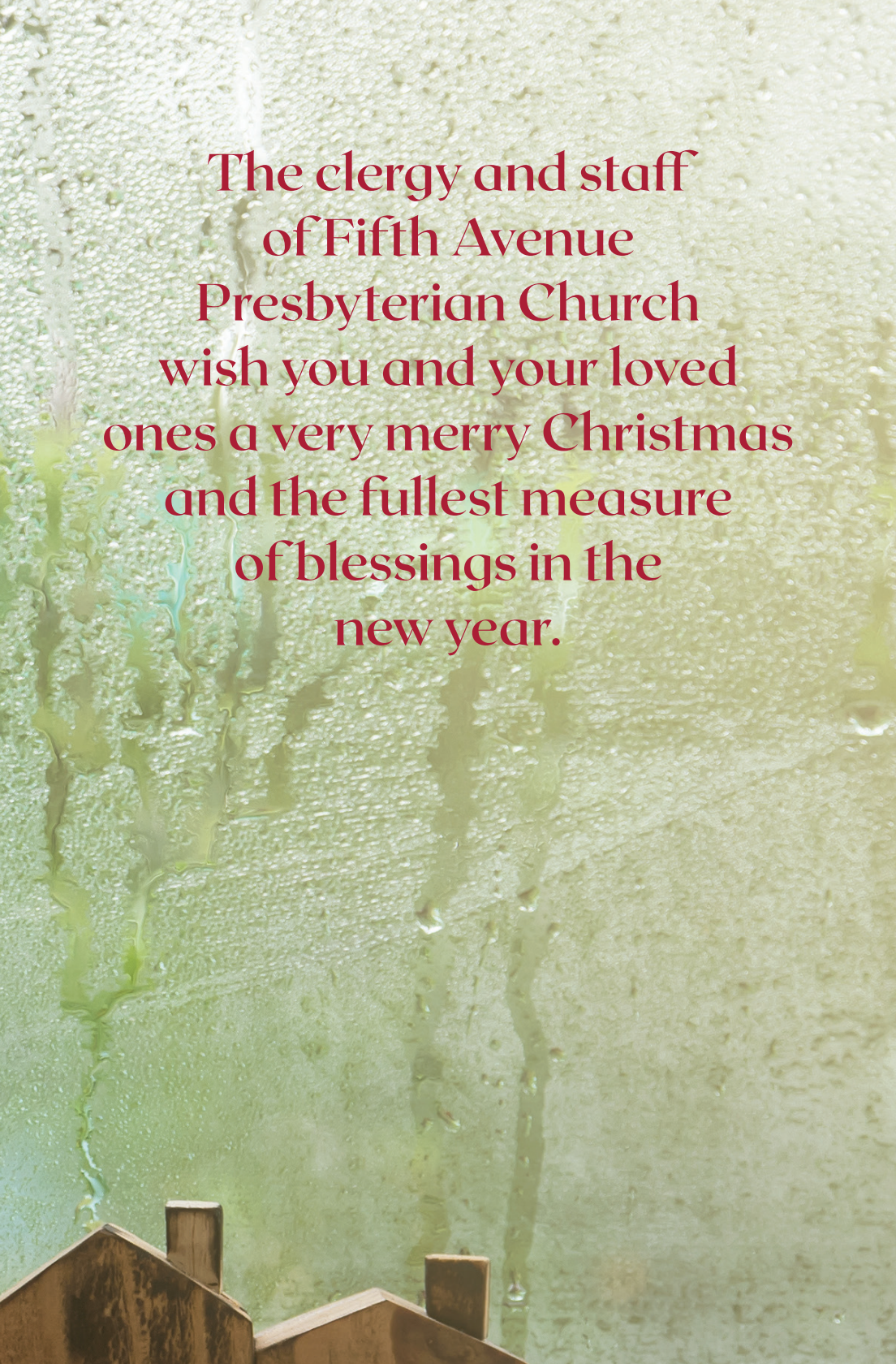
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The clergy and staff  
of Fifth Avenue  
Presbyterian Church  
wish you and your loved  
ones a very merry Christmas  
and the fullest measure  
of blessings in the  
new year.