When God Shows up in Unexpected Ways

Advent stories from our community



Immanuel UCC Advent 2026

A welcome from our pastor.

Advent is a four-week season before Christmas Day of waiting, watching, and preparing our hearts for the coming of the Christ child. The word Advent means “coming” or “arrival.” During these weeks leading up to Christmas, we remember the long-awaited hope of God’s people anticipating the coming of the Messiah. Advent invites us to slow down, pay attention, and make room for God in the midst of our everyday lives.

Yet the story of Christmas reminds us that God rarely works in the ways people expect. The Savior came not in a palace, but in a humble stable. The news of his birth was first announced not to kings and rulers, but to shepherds watching their flocks. Mary’s life took an unexpected turn when she received the angel’s message. The wise men followed a star into unfamiliar territory. Again and again, the Christmas story reveals a God who shows up in surprising places, through ordinary people, and in ways that changed lives forever.

That is the heart of this devotional guide, Unexpected: Advent Stories From Our Community.

Within these pages, you will find entries shared by people in our own community about how God has shown up in unexpected ways. Some may describe moments of profound change or answered prayer. Others may share quiet encounters with grace, unexpected kindness, renewed hope, or the presence of God in the midst of grief, uncertainty, or ordinary routines. Each page is a reminder that God often works in ways we do not recognize until we are on the other side of it.

As you journey through this Advent season, I invite you to read these stories with an open heart. Be reminded that you are not alone in your waiting, your wondering, or your hoping. Pay attention to the unexpected places where God may be at work in your own life. May these reflections help us see the familiar story of Christmas with fresh eyes and recognize that the God who came to us in Jesus Christ continues to show up in unexpected ways today.

These daily entries will be on our Facebook page if you would like to join us each day in online conversation. Find us here: https://www.facebook.com/ImmanuelUCCWrightCity

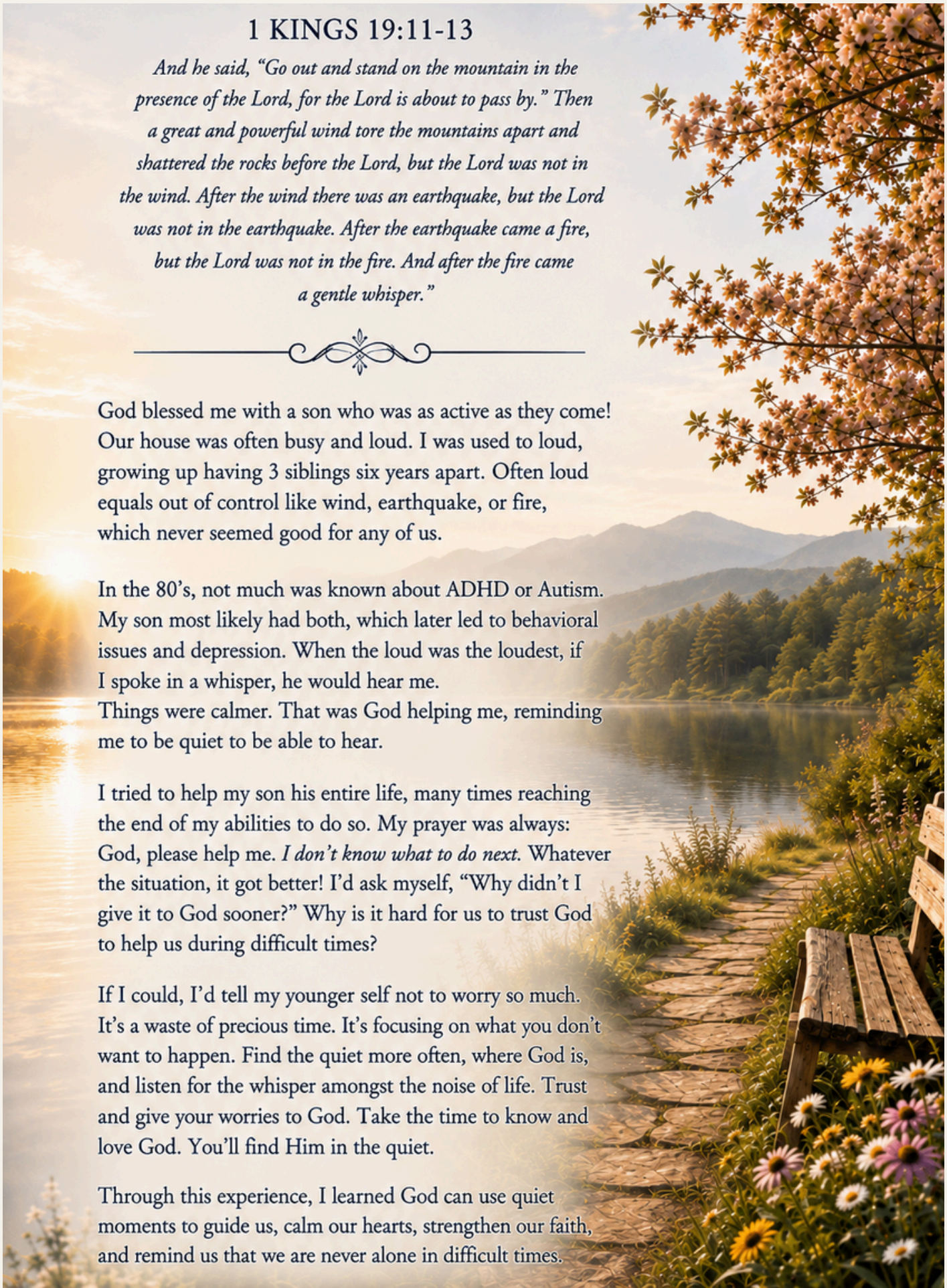
Advent Sunday messages at Immanuel will also explore the themes of unexpected ways God shows up. We would love for you to join us in person or listen to it through our Facebook page.

Pastor Kim



1 KINGS 19:11-13

And he said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper."



God blessed me with a son who was as active as they come! Our house was often busy and loud. I was used to loud, growing up having 3 siblings six years apart. Often loud equals out of control like wind, earthquake, or fire, which never seemed good for any of us.

In the 80's, not much was known about ADHD or Autism. My son most likely had both, which later led to behavioral issues and depression. When the loud was the loudest, if I spoke in a whisper, he would hear me.
Things were calmer. That was God helping me, reminding me to be quiet to be able to hear.

I tried to help my son his entire life, many times reaching the end of my abilities to do so. My prayer was always: God, please help me. *I don't know what to do next.* Whatever the situation, it got better! I'd ask myself, "Why didn't I give it to God sooner?" Why is it hard for us to trust God to help us during difficult times?

If I could, I'd tell my younger self not to worry so much. It's a waste of precious time. It's focusing on what you don't want to happen. Find the quiet more often, where God is, and listen for the whisper amongst the noise of life. Trust and give your worries to God. Take the time to know and love God. You'll find Him in the quiet.

Through this experience, I learned God can use quiet moments to guide us, calm our hearts, strengthen our faith, and remind us that we are never alone in difficult times.

Exodus 3:2-4

Monday, November 30

Respectfully submitted by: Donna Jones

2 There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. 3 So Moses thought, “I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up.”
4 When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, “Moses! Moses!”
And Moses said, “Here I am.”

This passage in Exodus reminds us that God can reveal Himself to us in ordinary moments in our lives. It could be in unexpected experiences, challenges, encounters or moments of silence.



Moses is going about the average day as a shepherd and stops to notice something remarkable. God showed up in an unusual way. This happens for us if we pause to be attentive. It might be an amazing sunrise in the morning, the detour you took that kept you out of traffic, or the dinner someone has prepared when you get home. The surprise call from a friend when you need it, the neighbor who helps whenever you ask, or the lunch conversation with a family member can all be God showing up in an everyday event.

During this Advent season, we tend to be extra busy, so it might be more challenging to pause to notice God calling to us. He could be simply getting our attention, or He might be calling us to do something new or move in a new direction. Pause to take time to notice God in ordinary and extraordinary ways during this season.

Scripture: Matthew 14:25-27

Tuesday, December 1

Respectfully submitted by: Jennifer Bergmann

Unexpected Waves, Unshakable Presence

In Matthew 14:25–27, the disciples were in a boat, struggling against the wind when Jesus came toward them, walking on the water. They were frightened because they didn't recognize Him and couldn't understand what they were seeing. But in the middle of their fear, Jesus spoke words of comfort: *"Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."*

Sometimes we look for God to move through a big miracle, an answered prayer, or a sudden change in our circumstances. Yet He may show up through a kind word from a friend, an unexpected opportunity, a door that closes to protect us, or a quiet peace when everything around us feels uncertain.

The disciples didn't expect to see Jesus walking on the water, but He came to them right in the middle of their storm. In the same way, God knows exactly where we are, even when life feels overwhelming. He is not limited by our expectations, and His presence is not dependent on our understanding.

Look back on your life and think about moments when God showed up in an unexpected way—through encouragement, strength, or an answer that came at just the right time. Remember that the storm does not mean God has forgotten you. Keep your heart open to how He may be working. You may not see Him coming, but you can trust that He is near.

Heavenly Father, thank You for meeting us in unexpected places and difficult seasons. Give us courage to trust You, even when we cannot understand Your plans. Remind us that we are never alone in our storms. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Isaiah 43:19 Behold, I will do new things; now it shall spring forth; shall ye know it? I will even make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert.

God advises us in this verse to never lose hope, always having faith in his spirit and in ourselves. None-the-less, for many, a change and despair can be catastrophic, and the feeling of triumphs seems like it never arrives. But stories of triumphant have proven that determination and faith can overcome times of bewilderment. I'm sharing this person's story as an example of faith that overcame.

On July 31, 1965, in Yate, Gloucestershire, England, Joanne Rowling was born into an upper middle-class family. Her father was an aeronautical engineer, her mum (English for mom) was a science technician. From an early age, young Joanne showed a propensity for writing, providing great imagination and detail in her words. Unfortunately, during her teenage years her mom was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS) and died six years later. This was the first devastation to young Rowling's life.

She went on to graduate from college, and upon graduation she first worked for Amnesty International. She then met her future husband and after their marriage taught English. They had a young daughter, but then a second devastation hit her- divorce. Growing up in a solid home foundation, she was suddenly on her own with a child to raise on her own, with little means or support.

As a single mother with no help from her ex-husband, she was the sole provider for herself and her child. She lived many years in poverty, receiving government assistance, which barely kept a roof over her head, and food on the table. The strain left her severely depressed, which included thoughts of suicide. But the one thing she always had was her talent for writing, so once again she began writing short stories to keep her mind alert and away from her depression, which helped her to concentrate on giving her daughter a happier and safer life. But selling her stories took time and took more toll on her. Then, one day while on a train, which had been delayed, she came upon this idea about a boy wizard, and a wizard school. She immersed herself in this new project of love and finally publishers took notice. Over the next seven years she created the Harry Potter series.

Motivated by love for her child and a need to climb out of the dark void in her life, Joanne, now known as JK Rowling, built herself a new life as an author.

Suddenly her desert flowed with a stream full of water and this story became the trail that she cut through her dark wilderness. As conveyed by God to the people of Israel, its time to stopping thinking of yesterday and build yourself a better tomorrow.



Scripture: Ephesians 3:20 Thursday, December 3

Respectfully submitted by: Heather Mallery

God Can Do Far More Than We Think

A Parent as Witness

A parent is meant to witness your life—to love every version of you and celebrate each milestone. I lost my mother when I was twenty-four, and in that moment, my path changed. I moved from a road she would have walked beside me to one I had to navigate without her. I faced decisions without being able to ask whether I was making the right choice, and I endured failure, pain, and loss without her there to help me heal.

Learning to Trust the New Path

Today, I know that I am okay, but reaching this point required me to learn something along the way: God was asking me to keep moving forward and trust that everything would be okay.
Although He was silent, He showed me what I needed to see. He taught me that I could rely on myself, trust myself, and take part in my own healing.

He also placed women along my path who stepped in with a mother's care. Friends' mothers, my mother-in-law, aunts, and coworkers have encouraged and supported me. I have been deeply blessed by these remarkable women.

Strength, Grace, and Support

I give all glory to God, because He breathed into me the strength, I needed to navigate life without my mother. In her absence, He also surrounded me with earthly mothers who offered the love, guidance, and support I needed. I am deeply grateful to my Heavenly Father for this grace. In response, I strive to show kindness, love, and generosity in all that I do.



Scripture: Hebrews 11:1

Respectfully submitted by: Hope Fick

Friday, December 4

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see."
Hebrews 11:1 NIV

"Trusting Creator is the solid ground our hope rests on. It means we can be sure of the things we do not yet see."
Hebrews 11:1 First Nations Version

To have faith is to be sure of the things we hope for, to be certain of the things we cannot see."
Hebrews 11:1 Good News Translation

The same verse in different translations, because some are word for word, others are thought for thought and I appreciate all of them. Faith is confidence, an action, and a requirement to please God. How it shows up can be very unexpected.

I have been praying for more supplies for Liberty Bell to be well stocked for winter sheltering. A day later we got a call from a group who wanted to donate 50 new sleeping bags, which is wonderful! The part that surprised me was that it was a local police department. They can be in a tough position when they have to move people out of their tents, and sometimes that person loses all of their belongings as well.

It made me realize they also have faith that things can be made better, and they took action to physically make it so. I'm convinced God will supply all needs even in the most unexpected ways. I can look to the past to be certain on the things I cannot yet see and be confident God has the ability to supply what we need, even in unexpected ways.



Scripture: Matthew 17:20

Respectfully submitted by: Walter Dufrain

Saturday, December 5

Matthew 17:20

"He replied, 'Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, "Move from here to there," and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.'"

Original drawing by Walter Dufrain



Scripture: Proverbs 3:5-6

Respectfully submitted by: Karen Gentry

Sunday, December 6

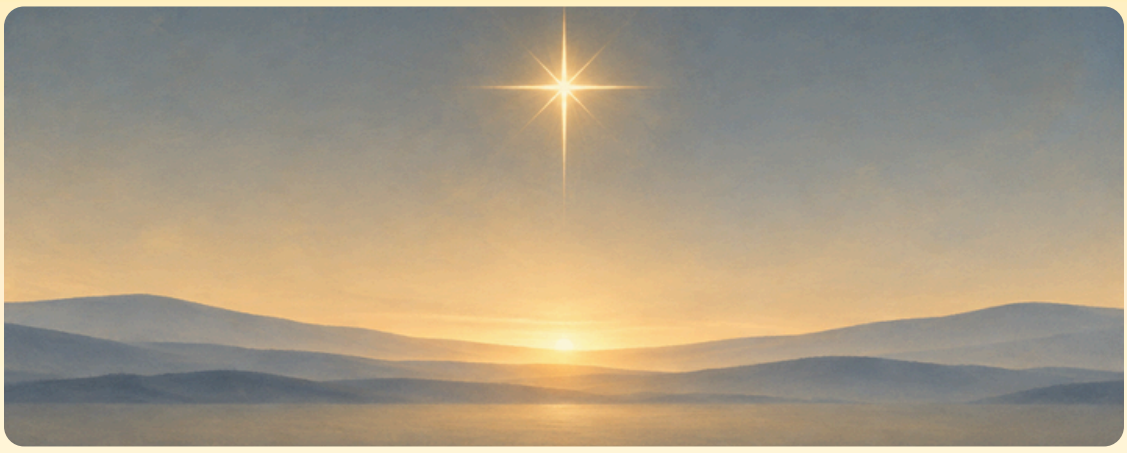
Proverbs 3:5-6
Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding.

According to AI, the focus of the book of Proverbs can be summarized as: gaining godly wisdom and understanding to live a righteous; discerning, and God honoring life.

I have been in Bible study groups where we have discussed the topic of going to God for guidance or direction on a particular problem or situation and then struggling with *"the hearing from Him part*". Did He answer, am I still waiting for an answer, am I not paying attention? The joke was, why doesn't He send the answer in the form of a neon or flashing sign so we could be sure?

While I still often still struggle with this, I find that if I remember to make time for quiet moments, talk to God, turn my worries over to him, let it go, trusting in Him to guide me, it helps the difficult conversation or the stressful situation. Saying a quick prayer, asking for the right words and humble heart is seeking his wisdom and trusting he will guide me. Often times I reflect on the outcome, and I am a bit surprised by how well it went and immediately know that it was God, he *"showed up for me once again"!*

Prayer:
Dear Lord, continue to be with us today, revealing yourself to us, guiding us to live our lives to honor you by showing our love for you, and others, in the ordinary moments of our days.
We are the good news of Jesus Christ, thru the grace and power of the Holy Spirit. Amen



Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4:17-18

Respectfully submitted by: Angie Case

Monday, December 7

2 Corinthians 4:17-18

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.



Case Family

Dear God,

Please continue to work in our lives, even when we cannot see what You are doing. Help us remain faithful in the unseen and trust You in the waiting. When we feel uncertain, remind us that Your silence does not mean Your absence. May we continue to trust Your plan, knowing that You are always at work. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Respectfully submitted by: Katelyn Thompson



It's easy to get upset and almost flustered when you feel like your prayers have gone unanswered. There's a phrase that I think about often: *"An unanswered prayer is an answered prayer."*

There are things I remember praying for a year ago that I can now look back on and thank God for not giving me. At the time, I couldn't understand why the answer wasn't what I wanted or why things were unfolding differently than I had prayed for.

But looking back, I can see how much He was preparing me for something I couldn't see yet.

God hears every single one of our prayers, and He answers them in ways we could have never expected. Sometimes the answer is yes, sometimes it's no, and sometimes it's simply not yet. A "no" doesn't mean God doesn't care about what we're asking for. Sometimes it's because He knows what we need far better than we ever could.

Every year around this time, I reflect on the changes and growth in my life throughout the past year, and without fail, I am always so grateful for those changes. Whether it be new people I've met, a new job, or simply growth in my relationship with Christ, I've never looked back and thought, *"Wow, this is exactly where I expected myself to be."*

I never could have imagined, let alone prayed for, the life I have now. Some of the prayers I once thought went unanswered were actually redirects, making room for things I never knew to ask for.

No prayer goes unnoticed. Trust in God, even when you don't understand. Believe that He hears every prayer, because He does.

Matthew 7:7
Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you shall find; knock, and it will be opened to you.

In Turkey, mosques and museums taught me much about the country; the humongous Bazaar taught me about prayer. The shopping Muslims, no matter where they were traveling from, heard the bells, shifted attention, literally ran to a common area and knelt in prayer.

Muslims do this "kneel and pray" routine 5 times a day. I'm not much for schedules and routine so the practice of prayer morning, mid-morning, noon, dusk, and night does not appeal. But, what I realized, as I reflected on this Islamic ritual, is that I pray every time I am alone – in the shower, in my car, during a walk.

During 1978-79, my son and I were volunteers in a small, impoverished village in remote Brazil. We were associated with the Ecumenical Institute, a religious Order experimenting with methods of community development. A theme song during our planning meetings was a hymn based on Isaiah 40:31.

Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength,
They shall rise up on wings as eagles.
They shall walk and not be weary; they shall run and not faint.
Help us, Lord, help us Lord in Thy way.

Vs 2: Those who serve the suffering world...
Vs 3: Those who live the risen life....

For years now, I have sung those words to God whenever alone. In response, I feel the warmth of God, the Love of God, God's grace, God's peace, and God's mercy.

The ringing of bells does not call me to prayer but rather a profound gratitude for the life I have lived, the challenges I have overcome, the opportunities I have claimed, and the joys I continue to celebrate.

Whenever we connect with God, how we pray, when we pray, where we pray – whether in prose, thought, or song – Jesus promises an answer.

PRAYER: Thank you, Holy One, for answering us, guiding us, and protecting us. Amen.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 12:7-9 **Thursday, December 10**

Respectfully submitted by: Rev. Walter Snowa

An Unexpected Advent

Remember when Paul the Apostle prays three times for God to remove his "thorn in the flesh"? Strangely, God responds, *"My grace is sufficient for you!"* Unlike Paul, I did not pray for anything close to what happened. Yet God entered.

My Advent surprise takes place as our family returns home after 4 years living in Indonesia. I am studying at Union Seminary preparing to return to Indonesia.

One November Sunday, we are worshipping at my home church. Christy, our 7-year old, comes skipping out of Sunday school with a day by day Advent calendar in her hands. *"Look what I got"* she says. I am busy talking with members of the congregation about our mission work. I am ignoring my daughter's pleading for attention.

"Let's do it," chimes our 3-year-old. *"We'll see,"* I respond. *"We'll talk about it later."* I don't expect later to happen.

Back at our apartment, our children have designed their plan. I am to set aside a time every day during Advent. I am to call the family together for Advent stories, lighting candles, marking off dates on an Advent calendar. It's a great plan. It sounds beautiful. But will they willingly come in from playing outside? It's like pulling hen's teeth to get them to come for supper. I have no faith in their plan.

"How about doing the calendar every Sunday?" I suggest.

"Advent is every day," I hear my children say. They promise to come when called. "We really, really mean it, Daddy."

Thus began an Advent tradition I never expected, let alone prayed for. If I forgot, my daughters reminded me. The ritual came with us as we returned to Indonesia – and was practiced each year thereafter.

Today, 50 years later, Advent calendar rituals remain special. Last year, I really enjoyed reading your stories and lighting Advent candles in our home. I celebrate that God imposed on our family that Advent and continues to impose desires on us all -- in unexpected ways.

Prayer: Thank you, God, for your grace poured out on us day by day, even when we least expect it. Amen

Proverbs 19:21
Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails.

Original drawing by Joy Dufrain



God's purpose prevails over what we may ask

It's the last morning of our family camping trip to the trout spring. Time to get a few minutes of fishin' in before we leave for home... but the fish are not cooperating.
Then across the valley come the chapel bells playing "Nearer My God to Thee"!
We all got strikes and began to reel in his blessings!!

Scripture: Lamentations 3:22-23 Saturday, December 12

Respectfully submitted by: Karen Cox

Lamentations 3:22–23
The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, His mercies never come to an end.
They are new every morning, **GREAT IS YOUR FAITHFULNESS.**



I think of this verse every time we sing hymn **(GREAT IS THY FAITHFULNESS)**
We are blessed every new day with the grace of our Lord. No matter what has happened we receive his mercies every day. No expiration date on his love. It is forever.
When we come to Christmas morning from the first day or our Christ life, we were given the blessing of (Hope and Love). The best gift of all. Our new born Savior. What it must have felt like for those that were there in the lowly manger.
It can be summed up in the refrain below:

Great is thy faithfulness,
Great is thy faithfulness,
Morning by morning new mercies I see.
All I have needed thy hand hast provided;
Great is thy faithfulness,
Lord unto me.



God has provided us the way. All we have to do is trust and follow. All we need - will be provided to us.

Merry Christmas!

Scripture: Ephesians 2:4-5 Sunday, December 13

Respectfully submitted by: Susie Rowan

But God

"But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us… made us alive together with Christ." — Ephesians 2:4–5

Advent is a season of waiting, hope, and remembering. As we prepare our hearts to celebrate the birth of Jesus, these two little words — **"But God"** — remind us of the greatest change the world has ever known.

We were separated from God by sin, unable to make ourselves right. **But God**, rich in mercy, stepped toward us. He didn't wait for us to become good enough. He loved us right where we were and sent His Son, Jesus, to bring us back to Himself.

The manger is where we see that love begins to take human form. The tiny baby lying in Bethlehem's manger was God's answer to our greatest need. Jesus came so that we could have life—not merely someday in heaven, but a new life with Him today.

Whatever you may be facing this Advent, remember those two powerful words: **But God**. When you feel discouraged — **But God**. When you feel alone — **But God**. When you wonder if there is hope — **But God**.

His mercy is greater than our failures, and His love is greater than our fears.

***Prayer:** Lord Jesus, thank You for coming to us in love and mercy. Help me remember this Advent that no matter what I face, You are my hope. Amen.*



Scripture: 1 Kings 19:5-7 **Monday, December 14**

Respectfully submitted by: Karen Cox

1 Kings 1:5-7 NIV
Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep. All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. The angel of the LORD came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you."

Elijah sees himself as all alone, as the only survivor of a vengeful and immoral king and queen. Yet how does God see Elijah? God knows God is Israel's kingmaker who has the power to take down rulers and put new ones in their place.

When I research this, I see that is exactly why we are blessed with the birth of Jesus. God knows when we are needing help and knows when to send us help. It may not be at the time you want it. It will be when the Lord knows the time is right. You may feel lost, but keep the Faith, and it will be revealed to us. This is the miracles of our Lord.

The wise men had to have great faith to go on a long adventure to see the new baby. They knew to trust and adventure out and protect the baby. They truly had to believe to do this.

At Christmas time, we can get lost with all the commercialism and feel we are short that one gift. Causing us stress, when we get lost and really forget what Christmas is about. (The celebration of the birth of our Savior). Jesus is the reason is a good quote.

Celebrate the greatest gift given the Christ Child. Who came to save us from our sins on the cross.

Keep Christmas as it should be Faith and Hope for the days to come. Enjoy your family and friends. Our needs have been provided and will be provided. Worship the Lord and go to church to get in line with your Faith. We have been blessed in this country to be able to worship our Lord freely.

I feel blessed with my family and our church family. We are a group of like-minded people who support each other. I truly enjoy each and every one of you. Be like the wise men stay, on your journey to seek the Lord. Faith Joy and Obedience as the Magi.



God's Blessings to you!

Scripture: John 4:7-10 Tuesday, December 15

Respectfully submitted by: Geri Tucker

Jesus Offers Living Water



Instead of the early morning or evening hours when it would have been cooler, or when other women were present, the Samaritan woman went to the well in the middle of the day. Various reasons are given, but that's what makes this encounter even more remarkable.

Because in the heat of the day, wanting to avoid social contact and while performing a physically demanding chore, Jesus showed up, and regardless of her being a Samaritan woman, he starts a simple conversation of asking her for a drink that continues to a greater sharing of "the living water".

Jesus showed up in that Samaritan woman's ordinary day and turned it into an extraordinary divine appointment. Sometimes Jesus shows up in the middle of our ordinary routines, in places we never expected. The Samaritan woman didn't schedule the encounter. She didn't even know who was sitting at the well. But Jesus knew exactly who she was and met her where she was. She thought she was showing up for water, but Jesus was showing up for her.

Let us be faithful, available and teachable when God shows up for us in the most unexpected times. He's already at the well, ready to give us the living water.

Prayer: Lord, thank You for meeting me in ways I never expected — in quiet moments, in detours, and in surprises that turned out to be part of Your perfect plan. I praise You for the ways You have already stepped into my life, even when I didn't see You there. Let me trust that You are faithful to guide my steps, to restore my hope, and to bring me to the place You have prepared for me.
In the name of Jesus. Amen

Respectfully submitted by: Kim Arbuthnot

God Was With Me All Along

Genesis 28:15-16

I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.
When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, 'Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.'

When I read God's promise to Jacob, *"I am with you,"* I'm reminded that I don't have to have everything figured out to trust that God is working in my life.

As a wife, mom, Mimi, and someone who balances work, business, and serving my community, I can get caught up in taking care of things. It's easy to focus on what needs to happen next and forget to notice how God may be guiding me right where I am.

This scripture encourages me to look back with a different perspective. Could an unexpected conversation have been His encouragement? Could a change in plans have led me toward something I needed? Could the person who showed up at just the right moment have been a reminder of His love?

Like Jacob, I may not recognize God's presence until afterward. Sometimes understanding comes when I pause and realize I had support, strength, or an open door when I needed it.

I care deeply about serving my community and making a difference in the lives of those around me. This passage reminds me that I don't have to have all the answers to serve with purpose. God is with me, guiding my decisions and helping me show His love through the way I care for others.

This Advent, I want to leave room to notice God in the middle of my everyday life. He may show up in ways I never expected, gently reminding me, *"I am with you."*

Scripture: James 5:16 Thursday, December 17

Respectfully submitted by: Susan Traylor

When God Shows Up Unexpectedly

A reflection on James 5:16

"The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective"
James 5:16, NIV

When we pray, we often picture how God will answer. But God is not bound by our expectations. Again and again. He shows up where we least expect it. Yet again and again, he answers in ways we never saw coming. James points to Elijah, whose prayers shut down the heavens and opened them up again. Yet when Elijah collapsed and hid in a cave, God met him not with wind, earthquake, or fire, but with "a gentle whisper."

Reflection: Years ago, near the end of a long shift, I was caring for an elderly patient who was frightened and alone. I was running on empty, and I whispered a desperate prayer: I quietly asked God for words and strength to comfort this patient. Before I could speak, a housekeeper slipped into the room, took the patient's trembling hand, and began softly humming, *"His Eye is On the Sparrow."* The patient's breathing slowed. For the first time, he smiled. Later, he told me he had been praying to God not to be alone. God answered his prayers and mine too, through someone I had barely noticed. But I knew that God had always been in that room.

This prayer, as James describes it: "*Pray for each other*." God rarely answers from a distance. When we carry each other's needs to God, he often answers by sending us to one another. You may be answering the call for someone today.

Prayer: Lord, open my eyes to see you in ordinary moments, especially at the bedside of someone who is hurting. When I am weary, remind me that you are already at work. Make me part of your answer for others; teach me to trust you. In your name I pray, Amen.



Making Room at the Door

"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me."
Revelation 3:20

This past summer, when the pace of life slowed, I intentionally invited a few people into my home for an afternoon cup of tea and some snacks. There was no agenda and no particular purpose to accomplish. It was simply an opportunity to listen, share stories, and enjoy meaningful conversation. Those afternoons reminded me how refreshing it can be to make intentional space for another person. As I wondered why I didn't do this more often, I made excuses for the way my home looked, or that what I had to offer was not good enough. Sometimes the greatest gift we can offer one another is simply our presence.

In Revelation 3:20, Jesus says, "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person." What a beautiful picture of Jesus! Rather than inviting us to come to his home, Jesus comes to our door. He meets us right where we are, in the ordinary spaces of our everyday lives. He desires to enter our world, sit at our table, and share life with us. His invitation is not to a hurried visit or a scheduled appointment, but to relationship. Yet, like any welcome guest, Jesus waits for us to open the door.

During this season of Advent, we are reminded that making room for Jesus is more than preparing our homes or celebrating traditions. It is about opening our hearts and making space for his presence. Our encounters with Jesus can be intentional when we slow down, listen for his voice, and simply enjoy being with him.

What might it look like for you to create intentional space to sit with Jesus? Perhaps it is a quiet morning with Scripture and a cup of coffee, an unhurried walk, a few moments of silence in the middle of a busy day, or time spent in prayer without an agenda. The invitation is simple: open the door to the presence of Jesus.

Prayer: Jesus, help me slow down, open the door of my heart, and welcome you into the ordinary moments of my life. Teach me to listen for your voice and delight in your presence, making room for you this Advent and always. Amen.

Scripture: John 1:4 **Saturday, December 19**

Respectfully submitted by: Rev. Diane Snowa

God sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This poem portrays how we as a congregation can live through him birthing light through compassion, justice, healing, hope and welcome.

I (Diane Snowa) take liberty with the words of Poet Joyce Rupp to offer an Advent meditation:

We are the ones birthing **light** into life:
We are the greeting of hospitality for the lonely;
We are the source of comfort for the sorrowing;
We are the rock of courage for the weakened;
We are the bearer of hope for the despondent;
We are the gift of acceptance for the rejected;
We are the voice of justice for the powerless;
We are the touch of healing for the wounded;
We are the sound of joy for the disheartened;
We are the home of welcome for the lost one;
We are the conveyer of trust for the self-doubter;
We are the calm dwelling for the anxiety-ridden;
We are the resting place for the worn and weary.
(Pause)
We are the congregation of Immanuel UCC.



Luke 1:27-28

"***...to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph... and the virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.***"

In Luke's words, the angel Gabriel steps into Mary's ordinary life with an extraordinary message. She is greeted not with demands, but with assurance: she is the chosen one, and God is with her. Mary's calling into motherhood begins not with her own plans, but with God's gentle invitation.

Mary's favor did not remove her questions or her worries. Scripture tells us she was troubled, unsure, and curious. Yet God's presence steadied her.

As I think about our adoption story, I can understand how Mary must have felt. We had struggled with infertility for many years. After years of expensive tests and doctor visits, going month to month with hopes and disappointments, we finally said, *"Well, this is God's plan, and we will live with it."* But God had another plan for us!

In May of 1988, we received an out-of-the-blue call saying there was a baby girl who needed a mom and dad, and we were chosen. Adoption is rarely part of a neatly scripted plan. Instead, it arrives as a tender invitation, a stirring of the heart, a nudge from God, a door opening into a future shaped by love. Like Mary, adoptive parents step into a calling that is both humbling and miraculous.

Adoption carries its own blend of joy and uncertainty. But the same promise spoken to Mary, *"The Lord is with you,"* is spoken over every adoptive parent who opens their heart to a child. God's favor is not the absence of fear; it is the assurance of His companionship.

Mary's yes brought Jesus into the world. An adoptive parents yes brings belonging, safety, and unconditional love into a child's life.

Both verses reshape the future. Both are acts of courage. Both reflect the heart of a God who builds families through calling, compassion, and covenant love. Adoption is a living testimony that God knits families together in ways that are holy, intentional, and deeply beautiful.

Scripture: Isaiah 55:8-9

Monday, December 21

Respectfully submitted by: Christine Staelens

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."
Isaiah 55:8-9

As I get older, I find it difficult to watch the news. Tragedy and dissent sell more news so what we tend to see is negative (even though there are so many positive things in the world). As a believer in God, I find it difficult to understand why God lets bad things happen. I also get a little irritated when I hear people say it is God's will; how can He let these things happen?

How can we fully trust a God we don't understand? How can we have faith when God's ways seem cruel at times? When we try to comprehend God's ways, we can become frustrated. Today's verse reminds us that His ways are higher than our ways and His actions often do not make sense to our earth-bound minds. God tells us that '*My ways are higher than your ways*'.

I try to not question God when bad things happen (although I don't always succeed). I pray for those affected by the tragedy and pray for strength to do God's will every day through my words and actions. While I don't understand why bad things happen, I have faith that God has a plan for us all.



Scripture: James 4:14-15 Tuesday, December 22

Respectfully submitted by: Glenn Nierman

"Why, you do not even know what will happen"

Some of life's best surprises happen unexpectedly. I remember my first year away from home at Washburn University in Topeka. I didn't have a car at school, and most of guys in the dorm went home every weekend. About the first week in October, I began looking forward to Christmas vacation. The time, especially on the weekends, got long for me, and I began to feel sorry for myself. I could hardly wait to get home to see my family and friends in Wright City. I was thinking about what gifts I might get for Christmas, too.

When I got home, I found the most wonderful gift for our family in the living room—Mom & Dad had bought a new RCA console with turntable and stereo speakers! How unexpected! I remember during my secondary school days Mom had rented a record player from Mike Schreiner's TV shop, so that I could enjoy records checked out from the Warren County Bookmobile, which came to the old City Hall/Firehouse across from the Farmers & Merchants Bank several times a month. Now I could buy and keep my own vinyl records. What a wonderful surprise!

One of the themes of the book of James seems to me to be that we should all seek to practice spiritual maturity; have patience; and have faith that the way of light and happiness—the way of the Lord—will prevail. We don't know what the future holds for us. There could be many wonderful surprises just around the corner.

So, as this Christmas season approaches, please join me in trying to practice spiritual maturity. Have faith that righteousness will prevail in our world and *"expect the unexpected"*—the happiest and most wonderful of Christmas Seasons—to be a part of your life this year!



Jeremiah 29:11-13

For I know the plans I have for you, Then you will call upon me,
You will seek me and find me

I'm a planner and organizer who likes things in order. Do you know how hard it is for me to let God be in charge? Trusting that He has plans for me when He gives no clues. I find I can be a bit bossy at times with my desire to put things in order. My younger sisters can attest to this and will tell you, especially when I slipped into "leadership mode."

There have been many times in my life when I've grown impatient with God because things weren't going the way I wanted, or I felt the need to be in charge. One of those times came when it became clear that I needed to change jobs, but I had no idea what to do next. Whenever I made time to slow down, let the stress take a back seat, guess who brought peace to my heart and showed me the way forward? God.

I do trust that He is the One truly in control, with "*plans to prosper you and not to harm you,*" as Jeremiah 29:11 says. Still, learning to rest in that trust takes patience. It is another reminder of how essential prayer is in our lives.

As I neared retirement, I became nervous about leaving full-time work. I worried about what day-to-day life would look like without the familiar structure I had depended on for so long. Again, I turned to prayer. That transition taught me something I continue to understand more deeply as I grow older: it is easier to let God be in charge placing each new season in His hands. I'm learning that relying on God is not a sign of weakness, but a source of strength, peace, and grace.

Advent reminds us that waiting is not wasted time. Just as God's people waited for the promised Savior, we can trust that God is present and at work even when we cannot see what comes next. When our plans change or the way forward feels uncertain, prayer helps us release our need for control and make room for His peace. This Advent, may we wait with open hearts, confident that the God who came to us in Jesus is still guiding us —one faithful step at a time.



Scripture: Luke 2:10-14 Thursday, December 24

Respectfully submitted by: Barb Junk

And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy

When I married Bill, he and his family didn't celebrate Christmas. But I changed that! I grew up with many traditions, like decorating the house and tree, gifts to go around, Christmas carols, and church choirs. We began the yearly tradition of cutting down a cedar tree at his family's farm and carried it home, INSIDE of our Volkswagen. That was a sight!

Remembering how we formed our Christmas traditions, I wondered when the traditions of Christmas first began.

I discovered that in 335 AD, during the reign of the Roman Emperor Constantine, who had halted the killing of Christians and made Christianity a national religion, the first Christmas was formally observed on December 25th. This date fell near winter solstice festivals on and around December 22nd. The 25th was chosen because nine months earlier, on March 25th, it is believed that Jesus was conceived by the Virgin Mary, also called the Annunciation. Although it is believed that Jesus was more likely born in the Spring or Summer, the Roman dates fit nicely in the cycles of the Christian calendar. The point that Constantine wished to make was to create an alternative to pagan winter solstice festivals.

I am thankful that Constantine created this alternative observance for the birth of our Savior, Messiah, Immanuel, Lord of All, Jesus Christ!

Since I am a pianist and lover of music, I wondered when the first Christmas carol was sung. It didn't take me long to find the answer. In the account of Jesus's birth (Luke 2:13-14), the angels burst into a majestic song: *"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among people with whom He is pleased!"* (NASB2020)

Whatever your Christmas traditions, celebrate the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ! This is the good news for our world.

Enjoy beautiful Christmas carols from Barb at this link: "Christmas With Barb"

https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLmt9giFIOe0haaY3ilLlRgmFA6mpdQkhL&si=Iy_xLY1Xy2fijqkS

Scripture: Romans 15:12-13 Friday, December 25

Respectfully submitted by: Pastor Kim

And again, Isaiah says, "The Root of Jesse will spring up, One who will arise to rule over the nations; in him the Gentiles will hope." 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 15:12-13 NIV

The Apostle Paul writes these verses of his letter to both the Jews and Gentiles (everyone else who isn't Jewish) in the struggling house church of Rome. Their church was planted with a mutual mix of Jews and Gentiles, but from AD 49-54 the Jewish people were expelled from Rome by Emperor Claudius. Without their Jewish members, it is likely the churches adapted to more Gentile traditions during the absence of their Jewish members. When Caudius died, the Jews returned, and from the tone of Paul's letter, there was inevitable conflict over leadership and ethnic matters. Paul's goal was to offer scriptural reminders of what the gospel is all about: love, reconciliation, being One people of God.

One of the radiant things about Christmas is how it brings people together who might otherwise have little in common. Our gathering together and generosity are movements toward oneness. We set aside our differences, trade baked goodies, donate to lend a hand to neighbors in need, and people from all walks of life celebrate the birth of Jesus. The ground is level at the manger. We are reminded that the good news of the Christ child was never meant for just one group of people. The shepherds came from humble beginnings, the wealthy magi traveled from distant lands, and all are drawn to the same Savior.

Christmas reminds us that God's love crosses every boundary we have created, bringing us together as one under the reign of the One who came to save us all.

May you be awakened to this incredible hope for ALL that fills us with overflowing joy and peace on this Christmas morning! Hallelujah!

The Promise of Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14)

The Encounter/Prophecy: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel" (meaning God with us).
It captures the core promise of Advent: God does not stay distant, He steps directly into human reality.

Advent Prayer

God of hope, as we enter this Advent season, quiet our hearts to receive Your promise of Immanuel—God with us. In our waiting, remind us that You are not distant. Meet us in the ordinary moments of our lives, in our joys and sorrows, and in the places where we long for peace.

Prepare our hearts to welcome Jesus with trust and wonder. When we feel alone, help us rest in Your presence. When uncertainty surrounds us, teach us to hold fast to Your promise. Let our words and actions reflect Your love, so that others may experience Your nearness through our kindness.
May this Advent deepen our hope, renew our faith, and open our hearts to the gift of Your Son.
Thank You for coming near and dwelling with us.
In Jesus' name, Amen.

Thank You

Dear Friends,

Thank you for helping make this year's Advent devotional so meaningful. To everyone who wrote a devotion, shared a prayer, or contributed a special picture or drawing, your time, creativity, and faith have been a true gift.

Your words and artwork will guide and inspire many as we prepare our hearts for Christmas. Each reflection, prayer, and image reminds us of the hope, peace, joy, and love of this season.

We are grateful for you and for the way you share your gifts with our community. We share this advent devotion book on behalf of Immanuel UCC Wright City with pride.

May you be blessed this Advent and always.

With heartfelt thanks,
Jackie Nierman



The Unexpected

