



*God's*  
PEACEABLE  
*Kingdom*

Advent Meditations  
2025

First Baptist Church  
Greenville, SC

# God's Peaceable Kin-dom\*

The independent Baptist church where I grew up didn't observe the Christian Year, so I didn't encounter Advent until seminary. Since then, my love and appreciation for this season have only deepened. Advent offers a reflective counterpoint to the frantic pace and rampant consumerism that so often define the secular holiday landscape. It also invites us into an alternative way of seeing, a *kin-dom* vision, that stirs our imagination toward a world made whole.

In this season, we anticipate and celebrate the incarnation: God taking on flesh, entering our humanity, and dwelling among us in the birth of Jesus. At the same time, we hold onto a second movement of hope, a deep longing for God's future redemption of all things, the ultimate "coming" when justice and peace prevail, when Christ returns, and God's kin-dom is fully realized.

This year, our Advent theme is *The Peaceable Kin-dom*, which draws from the prophetic book of Isaiah. Although Isaiah was written centuries before the birth of Jesus, and many of its passages originally honored events in ancient Jerusalem, the early Christian community recognized in these texts a deep resonance with their longing for a Messiah and soon embraced them as prophetic witnesses to Christ.

In Isaiah 11, we encounter the striking imagery of a wolf dwelling with the lamb and a lion being led by a child, an image of creation at peace. Isaiah's vision of God's peaceable kin-dom is not a naïve fantasy but a bold counter-narrative to the fear, brutality and domination that so often shape our broader world. It is a picture of Christ's kin-dom, already set in motion through Jesus' incarnation, yet not fully realized – a coming reign of goodness, abundance and peace.

At the consummation of history, Christ's kin-dom will not arise through force or human maneuvering. It will come as a gift, through the Spirit-empowered return and reign of a righteous and compassionate king. Isaiah 9 anticipates the birth of this king, a Messiah who brings light and peace into the world. The prophet offers these revelatory royal titles that speak to the Messiah's character and calling: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace – a Messiah worthy of our worship, faith and commitment.

This Advent season, may Isaiah's ancient words stir our imaginations and open our hearts. The Peaceable Kin-dom is a future promise and a present, transformative invitation to join God in shaping a world marked by generous neighborliness, justice, and enduring peace. With the gift of this promise before us, we trust that Jesus' peaceable kin-dom is coming; we ache for it, hope for it, and seek to live into its vision even now, worshiping the Messiah and embodying his way of life.

– Carol McEntyre, Senior Minister

\*We use the word *kin-dom* because *Kingdom* suggests hierarchy, with power concentrated at the top and a ruler lording it over passive subjects. *Kin-dom*, instead, names God's dream for humanity as a community of kinship and mutual care, where others are neighbors to be loved and all have what they need for an abundant, flourishing life. Therefore, *Kin-dom* highlights the relational, communal and liberating nature of God's reign. This language reflects the heart of Jesus' own teaching, as he consistently spoke of the "kingdom of God" (e.g., in the Beatitudes, in his parables, and in his proclamation that God's reign is drawing near) as a just, generous and transformative way of life.

# A Model for Family Worship

## I. Lighting of the Advent Candle (perhaps by a child)

Add one candle each week – three purple and one pink (third week). Name the candles as they are lit (first week – Hope, second week – Peace, third week – Joy, fourth week – Love). A family member may say the following: “The world waits in darkness for the coming of the Christ Child. Let us light a candle (one, two, three or four, depending upon the week) as a sign of our Hope (Peace, Joy and Love).”

## II. Scripture/Devotion

Parents may wish to read each day’s devotional and/or Scripture reading in advance to determine its use with their family. Parents may also use this time to read from a child’s book about the birth of Jesus, to incorporate an Advent calendar into the worship, or to display a nativity set. Children often enjoy bringing out the pieces a few at a time. First week: Place stable and animals. Second week: Place Mary and Joseph at a distance. Third week: Place shepherds at a distance. Fourth week: Mary and Joseph arrive at stable. Christmas Day: Place baby Jesus in the manger and Wise Men at a distance. Epiphany (12th day after Christmas): Place Wise Men at stable.

## III. Prayers of Thanksgiving and/or Prayers for Others

Every devotional in this booklet ends with a prayer. A family member may also wish to lead in prayer. Another option is to allow each family member to pray sentence prayers. The prayer time could be closed with the following: “Come to us, Lord Jesus. Prepare our hearts for the coming of the Christ Child, and while we wait, make us grateful for all your gifts to us. Amen.”

## IV. Extinguishing of the Candle

The following words may be read responsively or read aloud by a family member: “It is now time to put out the Advent candle(s), but because we have seen, spoken and tasted of the promise of Christmas, the light of God remains in our hearts while we wait.”

## V. Appreciation of Advent Bells

During this season, visit the church parking lot to listen to our Advent bells as they ring the messages of Hope, Peace, Joy and Love. Each day, the bells peal at noon and play carols at 1:00pm.

# Advent Activities

During this special season, encourage each family member to do something special for other family members. Find ways to say, "You belong. You are special to me."

## **First Week**

Attend the Hanging of the Green Service on Sunday morning. Learn about the meanings of our decorations as we adorn our Sanctuary for the season. Read the Christmas story as part of your family's preparation for Christmas. Consider making your own Advent wreath for part of your family's celebration. Encourage each family member to contribute to the Lula Whilden World Missions Offering.

## **Second Week**

Be in worship Sunday morning to hear the Sanctuary Choir and chamber orchestra present a service filled with the songs of Advent and Christmas. Make special gifts for teachers, such as bookmarks, cookies, pies, etc. Write a special note of personal thanks.

## **Third Week**

Be in worship on Sunday morning, celebrate a baptism and hear the Christmas music of the Bell Tower Ringers. Bake cookies and wrap them colorfully to take to people who are confined to their homes, the elderly in nursing homes, or those who live alone and don't have family nearby. Make personalized Christmas cards for grandparents and other elderly relatives. Make a point of telling them they are special. Arrange a caroling party in your neighborhood or for your Sunday School Class.

## **Fourth Week**

On Sunday morning, gather with your church family for worship and celebrate a baptism. On Sunday evening, attend the Candlelight Service of Lessons and Carols with family and friends. On Wednesday evening, observe communion as part of the Christmas Eve service.

## **First Week of Christmas**

Be in worship on Sunday morning. We will worship as a church family. There will be no Sunday School or child care.

# Advent and Christmas Worship and Activities

## Sunday, November 30

Unwrapped MinisTREE Gifts Due

**9:30am** Advent Sunday School for Adults (Fellowship Hall): *Out of Egypt I Have Called My Son* – Matthew 2:13-15 and Brandon Baughn with World Relief

*The Spiritual Formation Committee offers a churchwide adult Sunday School option during the season of Advent. This series is open to any interested adult.*

**10:30am** First Sunday of Advent – The Candle of Hope – Hanging of the Green Service (Sanctuary) with Proclaimer Camille Loomis Rehnborg

*Join your church family in preparing the house of the Lord and our hearts for the Advent season.*

## Wednesday, December 3

**6:00pm** *Wednesdays@First* MidWeek Classic: Gathering for Hope and Healing (Fellowship Hall)

*This service around the tables, led by FBG ministers, will embrace both the joy and sorrow of the season, holding both with hope.*

## Friday, December 5

**10:30am** Friday Lunch & More: Christmas Sing-Along (Fellowship Hall)

*Sponsored by the Engaged Aging Ministry, Friday Lunch & More features games, book reviews and a program followed by lunch.*

**5:00-9:00pm** Youth Family Night of Lights

*Youth enjoy a fun evening of Christmas lights, hot cocoa, a petting zoo, ice skating and more!*

## Sunday, December 7

**9:30am** Advent Sunday School for Adults (Fellowship Hall): *Out of Egypt I Have Called My Son* – Matthew 2:16-18 and David White with Fostering Great Ideas

*The Spiritual Formation Committee offers a churchwide adult Sunday School option during the season of Advent. This series is open to any interested adult.*

**10:30am** Second Sunday of Advent – The Candle of Peace – Music Sunday Worship Service (Sanctuary) with Sanctuary Choir, Strings and Soloist Craig Price

**1:00-5:00pm** FBG Kids Christmas Party and Caroling (B420)

*Children in Grades 1-5 will enjoy Christmas caroling and a party.*

**3:30-5:00pm** FBG Kids Christmas Party for K3-K5 (B420)

*Children 3-years-old through K5 will enjoy a Christmas party.*

**5:00-7:00pm** Sunday Night Live for Youth Family: Christmas Party and White Elephant (AYMC)

*6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade students meet for games, supper and fellowship.*

## **Wednesday, December 10**

*Wednesdays@First Activities*

**6:00pm** *Adults@First*: Christmas Party (Fellowship Hall)

*The evening's activities will include games, music and a cookie exchange!*

## **Thursday, December 11**

**9:30am-4:00pm** Engaged Aging Hike to Paris Mountain

*Sponsored by the Engaged Aging Ministry, gather to ride the church bus and enjoy a hike with lunch to follow.*

## **Sunday, December 14**

**9:00am** Youth (6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> Grades) Christmas Fellowship Breakfast (AYMC)

**9:30am** Advent Sunday School for Adults(Fellowship Hall): *Out of Egypt I Have Called My Son* – Matthew 2:1-12 and Fikret and Zeliha Burgazli with Palmetto Care and Share Institute  
*The Spiritual Formation Committee offers a churchwide adult Sunday School option during the season of Advent. This series is open to any interested adult.*

**10:30am** Third Sunday of Advent – The Candle of Joy – Worship Service with Proclaimer Carol McEntyre, including Baptism, Sanctuary Choir and Bell Tower Ringers

**11:30am** Engaged Aging Christmas Party (Fellowship Hall) sponsored by the Roadrunners featuring a Musical Performance by the Children's Choir

**5:00-7:00pm** "Low Key" Sunday Night Live for Youth (AYMC)

## **Wednesday, December 17**

*Breathe Week* – No *Wednesdays@First Activities* except Sanctuary Choir Rehearsal

## **Friday, December 19**

**10:00am** First Baptist Day School Christmas Celebration (Sanctuary)

## **Sunday, December 21**

**9:30am** Advent Sunday School for Adults(Fellowship Hall): *Out of Egypt I Have Called My Son* – Matthew 2:14-15, 19-23 and Adrick Caesar with The Good Shepherd's House  
*The Spiritual Formation Committee offers a churchwide adult Sunday School option during the season of Advent. This series is open to any interested adult.*

**10:30am** Fourth Sunday of Advent – The Candle of Love – Worship Service (Sanctuary) with Proclaimer Carol McEntyre, Sanctuary Choir and Harp

**6:30pm** Candlelight Service of Lessons and Carols with Sanctuary Choir, Vocare and Harp  
*This service of scripture readings and music with congregational candle lighting is held to celebrate the season. A special Lula Whilden World Missions Offering is collected.*

**7:30pm** College Drop-In at Jones' Home

## **Wednesday, December 24**

**5:00pm** Christmas Eve Service (Sanctuary) with Proclaimers Carol McEntyre and Bridget Kokolis  
*This family service includes communion and a special offering for Local Relief.*

## **Sunday, December 28**

No Sunday School on Campus

**10:30am** First Sunday of Christmas Worship Service (Sanctuary) with Proclaimer Matt Rollins – All Worship Together – No Worship Care

## **Sunday, January 4**

**9:00am** Churchwide Epiphany Sunday Breakfast (Fellowship Hall)  
*Make reservations for this breakfast (\$10/adult, \$5/child) on Realm by December 31.*

No Sunday School

**10:30am** Epiphany Worship Service (Sanctuary)

## **Wednesday, January 7**

*Breathe Week* – Celebrate Epiphany with Your Family – No *Wednesdays@First* Activities except Sanctuary Choir Rehearsal

# HOPE



## Sunday, November 30, 2025

Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

**T**he word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

In 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."  
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction  
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.  
He shall judge between the nations  
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;  
they shall beat their swords into plowshares  
and their spears into pruning hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation;  
neither shall they learn war any more.  
O house of Jacob,  
come, let us walk  
in the light of the Lord!

*- Isaiah 2:1-5*

# Monday, December 1, 2025

Psalm 124; Genesis 8:1-19; Romans 6:1-11

I am the eldest daughter so it was inevitable that I would grow up loving a good checklist. Order, rules, and predictability were the things that gave me peace and comfort as a child. But growing up and learning more about the world brought the unfortunate realization that order, rules, and predictability are not guaranteed. In fact, very little is within my control. And, according to my therapist, I have to be okay with that.

Like many of us, I have felt the pain and uncertainty of the world around us. I've felt helpless and lost. Where was my checklist? What rule could I follow to fix it all? Surely, once I found it, order and predictability would return. I spent years searching for these rules that always seemed just out of reach.

Not long after I began visiting First Baptist, I came across these verses:

*Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. (Philippians 4:8-9)*

*He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)*

For the first time in a long time, the crushing weight on my chest lifted. I found a checklist. While these aren't tasks that can ever be fully completed or offer the instant fix I longed for, they have become a guidepost. They have offered peace at a time I needed it most.

As we enter this season of Advent and celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, I will continue to do what is just, to practice kindness, and to trust that the peace of God is with me even when the world says otherwise.

***God, as we navigate a world that can be cruel and senseless this Advent, help us remember that the path to peace is simple. Aid us in being loving, kind and just as we walk alongside You. Amen.***

Hali Tankersley has been attending FBG with her wife, Callie, since the fall of 2024. She is a member of the Bridge Sunday School Class and the LGBTQ & Friends Community Group. If you spend more than five minutes with Hali, you'll learn all about her dog, Hank.

## Tuesday, December 2, 2025

Psalm 124; Genesis 9:1-17; Hebrews 11:32-40

### Stars and Angels

*It's coming up on Christmas.  
It's turning cold again.  
Electric stars and angels shine on Main Street.  
Kids at storefront windows  
Are dreaming Christmas dreams  
Of what may greet them underneath the tree.  
And I was someone's little boy,  
Who dreamed of Christmas snow,  
Of Santa Claus and reindeer.  
But that was long ago . . .*

*Outside the elementary school,  
A banner by the door  
Proclaims the Christmas pageant is tonight.  
From out here, on the sidewalk,  
I can picture what's in store  
Within the warm glow of the schoolhouse light.  
And I was someone's little boy  
In the grade school Christmas show,  
With wise men and with shepherds.  
But that was long ago . . .*

*Now . . . I'm no one you'd notice  
As nighttime starts to fall.  
I wonder sometimes if I am still anyone, at all.  
And am I just a victim,  
Or is this the bed I've made?  
And does that really matter when a life turns  
out this way?  
I used to look for miracles;  
Now I'm beyond belief.  
I just hope for a warm meal and a few hours  
of relief.*

*And I think of baby Jesus,  
With a manger for his bed,  
Who, as a grown man, found he had no place  
to lay his head. (Luke 9:58)*

– by Mark Ashworth and David Richardson, 2010

When I heard our Advent theme was *God's Peaceable Kin-dom*, I thought of these lyrics. The song was written in response to personal experiences I had as an intern for United Ministries under Beth Templeton at Place of Hope. It reflects insights I received from her and from my interactions with the people we served, hearing about their everyday lives and what they face and feel – especially during longer nights, colder weather and holidays. My experiences during that internship made a deep and lasting impression. Reflecting on what I saw and heard, I wrote these lyrics from the perspective of a homeless person.

***Caring God, open our hearts to those around us, treating all with dignity and respect, for we are all your children. Amen.***

David Richardson and his wife, Diane, have two adult children and a grandson.

## Wednesday, December 3, 2025

Psalm 124; Isaiah 54:1-10; Matthew 24:23-35

### A Different Christmas

In the 1993-94 school year, our Duke University younger son, Andrew, spent his junior year studying in England. In agreement with him, we decided for the full family to travel to England to join him for Christmas rather than have him return to Raleigh for the holidays.

After much anticipation and planning, Betty went first. She and Andrew traveled together in France for a few days after a treacherous crossing of the English Channel in what the locals called a “tempest.” Older son, Manning, a law school student, and our younger daughter, Kathryn, followed. Also arriving was Andrew’s girlfriend. Because of work responsibilities, I traveled last, taking a courier responsibility to save money.

Manning contacted a friend from Furman days who was working as a nanny for a year. The British family gave her time off for the holidays but did not include her in their Christmas plans. She was invited to join our family. Not being known as a big spender on travel accommodation, let’s say our small London hotel (no “lift”) would not make the star rating scale, and we all got to know each other quite well in the space we occupied!

Like the first Christmas, all this was “a new thing” for us. We left behind the familiar—church services, family meals, gift exchanges, decorations and more. We learned about Christmas the British way, Boxing Day, the importance of a message from The Queen, and more.

We worshiped on Christmas Eve in a magnificent church with music to match. Betty worked miracles on a hot plate and prepared a spaghetti with sauce and broccoli meal to rival any feast. We learned that celebrating the peace, hope and joy of the season is not based on geography, tradition, or the familiar, and that the “Word” is sound.

From our group, the passage of time has brought a new generation. There are two lawyers, two ministers, one school teacher—all sharing this common history. In their special bank of good and positive experiences, I believe all would attest that memories of and lessons from this Christmas remain with them today.

***Amid all the wonderful trappings of our Christmas celebration, let us be eager to unwrap the main gifts of new life, opportunities and options Christ brings in and through us. May we seize the present and store memories for the future. Amen.***

Austin Connors and his wife, Betty, have been a part of FBG for three years. He is a Sunday School teacher in rotation, and she is a Mission Backpack-er. They particularly appreciate the music of FBG and the justice ministry. Three children and seven grandchildren are great blessings in their lives.

## Thursday, December 4, 2025

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Isaiah 4:2-6; Acts 1:12-17, 21-26

### The Gift of Invitation and Neighborliness

I have many fond memories of Advent and Christmas, such as a unique advent calendar, trimming the tree and Mom placing individual tinsel reused from last year, singing all season, hanging and opening stockings, orange yeast rolls on Christmas morning, attending the Epcot Candlelight Processional with Dad in 2019, and, of course, special gifts. This devotion is about a different kind of gift, the gift of Invitation and Neighborliness.

I hadn't been to church in over 20 years, except with my parents at holidays. I was co-leading a residential diversity and inclusion workshop in Green Bay in early 2004. Dave, a participant, randomly came up to me at break and said, "You should come to our church." I visited, started attending and became very involved. What a gift he gave me to restart my faith journey!

In Cincinnati, I attended a small church in Reading. I led the search committee for a new music minister. At that time, there were 5-6 people in the choir. Debbie started the job in August and hand-wrote letters to people inviting them to join the choir. I replied that I was just too busy with work, church leadership, and other commitments. In mid-September, Debbie was waiting for me outside church and handed me a CD of the fall music and a CD and the score for the Christmas cantata. She said, "See you Wednesday at 6:15!" Debbie would not take "no" for an answer! I am forever grateful for her invitation and the gift of music. We have become dear friends. She taught me handbells, and I joined her twice attending a summer camp for church musicians in Wisconsin.

My story of joining the choir at First Baptist Greenville is similar. After Hanging of the Green, on my second visit to church, Senior Minister Carol McEntyre insisted that I talk to Interim Minister of Music Fred DeFoor about joining the choir right then! Fred and the Sanctuary Choir welcomed me enthusiastically! It is a true gift to sing and learn from this talented group.

I am forever grateful for these gifts of invitation and neighborliness and their role in my faith journey.

***Lord, help us to be good neighbors and reach out and invite others to join us in our journey. We never know when our/your invitation will be the biggest gift to them, and encourage us to accept your invitations! Amen.***

Kathy Barksdale is new to Greenville and has been attending First Baptist Greenville for a year. She sings in the Sanctuary Choir and plays handbells in Bell Tower Ringers. Kathy, her partner, Tucker, and dog, Jazz, live in Simpsonville. She is retired from Procter & Gamble, moving six times in her career and twice since retiring. Kathy enjoys summers in Maine.

## Friday, December 5, 2025

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Isaiah 30:19-26; Acts 13:16-25

**C**hristmas is both worship and family time. I celebrate the birth of Jesus who is the incarnation of God's Love for each of us. He came that you and I can be with God now and at the end of our lives. It is the love of God through Christ that spills over to enrich our relationships with our family and friends, especially this time of year.

When I was a youth, I had a beautiful collie who was primarily my dog, although I had to share him with my brothers. When my collie got the mange and had his fur cut off, he was funny looking to us. However, it became my duty to bathe my dog every day for two weeks, using a special ointment to kill his mange. I do not know if you have ever bathed a large dog before, but you cannot do so and stay dry. Bathing my collie in October was not so bad, but in November, when the weather turned cold, the bath became an ordeal. As the dog healed and his fur grew back, the dog was accepted back into the family circle.

This story reminds me that even when I get out of sorts with God, he still looks after me, much as I looked after my collie when he looked funny and had to be bathed every day. I believe God looks after me much the same way, keeping me in the circle of his Love. I am amazed at God's patience with me, especially when I am foolish or acting outside the boundaries of how he wants us to relate to others.

Sometimes as we get older, we are tempted not to act or to get up to help others. As a Christian, I see it as my responsibility to do my best to assist others to be their best. Christmas is so rich in teaching us how special we are to God. Now, I want to reach out to others, so I can share the love I see in God. Reaching out can be both physical and giving of ourselves and our resources.

***O God, thank you for holding us in your circle of love, even when we don't believe we deserve it. Help us to share that love with those we encounter. Amen.***

Duke McCall is a lawyer who practiced in the courts of South Carolina and the Federal Government. He thoroughly enjoyed his work for the 50 years he practiced. He is married with three children and seven grandchildren. He is the son of a minister and a wonderful mother. They taught him well.

## Saturday, December 6, 2025

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Isaiah 40:1-11; John 1:19-28

**A**nd the angel said to her,  
"The Holy Spirit will come upon you,  
and the power of the Most High will overshadow you;  
therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God."

That's got to be the craziest way to find out you're expecting! Most people find out alone in a bathroom, but to have an Angel come to you and declare it?! Do you think Mary went to the town Healer afterward to confirm? I know that when I found out about my medical miracle child, my doctor was my first phone call. I found out from a home test and not an angel of God, so it does make me wonder how Mary felt.

This time last year I was a ball of happiness, fear, disbelief and nausea. After spending years adjusting my mind to the knowledge that I would not be able to have a child the "traditional" way, I find out I'm pregnant. How should I be feeling? Is it ok to grieve the life I had been forced to accept, while also celebrating the new one that's being created? What if something goes wrong? Should I delay being excited till she's here? Will I even be any good at this?

I can only imagine what was going on in Mary's mind. Not only are you having a child you were unprepared to receive, but now you have the added stress of raising the literal Son of God! Now that's pressure!

Where did Mary find her peace? Was it in the conversations with Joseph on their journey? Was it in petting the donkey she rode or perhaps looking up at the stars and taking in the beauty of God's creation.

I would often listen to Amy Grant's "Breath of Heaven" when I needed to find my peace during this time. The lyrics reminded me to take a breath and find the calm in the chaos of my mind. I got to choose to expand my amazing family, and although I had to carry her by myself, I did not walk this path alone. What an incredible gift and privilege!

***Dear God, help us embrace joy even when our fear is deafening. Guide us through our anxieties and push us toward finding your peace. Amen.***

Sara Kathryn Coates, a member of First Baptist Greenville since childhood, sings in the Sanctuary Choir. She and her partner, Brandon Gaunt, are the proud parents of a three-month-old daughter, Samantha.

# PEACE



## Sunday, December 7, 2025

Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

**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,  
the spirit of counsel and might,  
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.  
His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see  
or decide by what his ears hear,  
but with righteousness he shall judge for the poor  
and decide with equity for the oppressed of the earth;  
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,  
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.  
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist  
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

The wolf shall live with the lamb;  
the leopard shall lie down with the kid;  
the calf and the lion will feed 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.  
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,  
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.  
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.

On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples;  
the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

*- Isaiah 11:1-10*

## Monday, December 8, 2025

Psalm 21; Isaiah 24:1-16a; 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

The book of Isaiah, finds the prophet calling out the nation of Israel for its idolatry and treatment of the poor and warning of a coming judgment, yet Isaiah also offers hope to the people, speaking of one that is to come who will bring peace. This peace will extend beyond humanity extending to all of creation. Isaiah 11:6 says this peace will be so complete that enemies will lie down together. It is easy to assume this kind of peace is only accomplished in eternal life, but Isaiah consistently speaks of God's peaceable Kin-dom being here on earth. If that is the case, it leads me to wonder what it would take for such creatures to live in harmony.

Growing up near the end of the Cold War, when I thought about the Soviet Union, I pictured people who hated all Americans. I wasn't worried about war; I was worried about annihilation. In elementary school we would have drills to simulate what we should do in case of a nuclear attack. In short, if you asked me as a 9-year-old to describe the biggest foe to God's Peaceable Kin-dom, that person would have inevitably been Russian.

At the end of my senior year of college, I had the opportunity to take part in a mission trip to Moscow and parts of the former Soviet Union. Although the Cold War had ended and the Iron Curtain fallen, I was fearful and prepared for a hostile encounter, yet my experience in Russia was anything but hostile. One night, I had a conversation with our interpreter that would change the way I understood the world. I told her, "When I was growing up, I was taught that Russians hated Americans. Did you grow up despising Americans?" She looked at me a bit funny and said, "No, I was too busy looking for food to worry about you." I started to laugh but instantly realized she wasn't joking. She continued, "I mean, I guess if you were in the army you thought about the US, but we had enough to worry about on our own." That broke my "us vs. them" worldview. It was a lived moment where the kingdom of this world became the Kin-dom of our God, and I am forever grateful for that moment.

In Isaiah 11's peaceable kin-dom, when the animals come together they do not cease to be themselves. Instead, they recognize their Creator in each other, and adjust their behavior to honor God's image and the one in whom it is reflected. That is why I like moving from the imagery of Kingdom to Kin-dom. Kingdoms are loyal to a King. "What does the king desire of me?" A Kin-dom makes kin – family – the focus. "We are all connected and related, how do we (including our King) do this together?" Through Christ, the Bible says we are children of God and co-heirs with Christ. We are family with Christ and with each other. That is how I can see God's peaceable Kin-dom established "on earth as it is in Heaven." May it be so in each of us.

***Creator God, as we journey through this season of Advent, may you birth in us your compassion for this world. May your Spirit break through our misconceptions and reveal the beauty of your image in the faces we once saw as foe. May Christ's light illumine our path to peace. Amen.***

Michael McEntyre is the Minister of Engaged Aging at First Baptist Greenville.

## Tuesday, December 9, 2025

Psalm 21; Isaiah 41:14-20; Romans 15:14-21

**T**his Christmas will be different from any Christmas before because for the first time in my life I will not only be looking forward to tree trimming, Christmas caroling, and time with family, but my husband and I will also be looking forward to the birth of our very first child. Just like any first-time parent, I have found myself consumed with endless researching – strollers, diaper brands, timelines for introducing new foods – but the thing on which I find myself most often ruminating is how we will ensure our child’s life is marked by joy, consideration, kindness and empathy.

Now, seemingly more than ever, it is hard to stay engaged with the world around you without hearing of suffering – whether it be families separated and detained or at-risk communities questioning how they will stock their pantries while dealing with rising costs of living. In a time when society seems marred by violence and self-servitude, I find myself sometimes fearing for what the world may become and for what my child will face as they try to make their place in it.

However, as Christians have done for generations, when I find myself succumbing to these fears and anxieties, I am able to find direction and solace in scripture. Our theme for this Advent season is God’s Peaceable Kin-Dom, and we can refer to Isaiah for an idea of what that may look like. In Isaiah we are given the image of a new leader, one who communes with the Lord and rules in such a way that his kingdom offers aid and fairness to the underserved and mercy and love for those considered the least of his kingdom. He is so filled with righteousness that one breath from his mouth is enough to destroy the wicked. Under his rule, his people are able to live in peace with those unfamiliar to them, not fearing what they don’t know, but accepting it without qualm.

I take heart in knowing that this is the blueprint of our righteous leader and the kingdom into which he invites us, and I know I can look towards him for direction when teaching my child how to navigate this world.

***Lord, during these times of distress, I pray the ways of this world be peace rather than hostility, welcome rather than rejection, and love rather than indifference. Amen.***

Jalyn Rutledge is a member of FBG and a member of the FBG staff as the Ministry Assistant to Pastoral Care and Engaged Aging. She is married to Coleman Bazen, and they are expecting their first child this coming May.

## Wednesday, December 10, 2025

Psalm 21; Genesis 15:1-18; Matthew 12:33-37

**H**ow does one find peace in God's kingdom when it seems every piece of it is suddenly taken away?

Last November, within the span of 24 hours, I went from playing tennis with my wife and chasing my toddler at the park to lying in a hospital bed paralyzed from the chest down. The questions were vast and the answers were vague. How do you treat this extremely rare autoimmune attack? Was I ever going to walk again? Why would this ever happen to me?

I spent the next six weeks in the hospital, which spanned mine and my daughter's birthdays, Thanksgiving, and most of the Christmas season. Recovery was painstakingly slow and challenging as I progressed from being able to wiggle one toe to sitting up on my own to using a wheelchair independently. Things that I had previously taken for granted, like driving a car, going for a run, or picking up my child, seemed like impossible tasks. With three additional months of outpatient rehab and countless appointments to follow, it was so hard to imagine ever feeling normal again.

My biggest goal leaving the hospital was to take my first steps again before my one-year-old daughter took hers, and I'm happy to say that I beat her (by a few days!). In fact, this entire year has been filled with little "first steps," like my first independent jog, a solo bike ride, or a family vacation, to distance myself from the past.

I'd be lying if this holiday season didn't fill me with memories of the last. I'm trying to accept that peace is a process and that in finding peace, tough emotions and lingering questions can still exist. In Exodus 3:5, God tells Moses to "Take off [his] sandals, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." Just as Moses had many doubts and fears when God called him to lead, I don't know if I will ever fully recover or if this will happen again. However, God reminds us he has laid a perfect, holy foundation for our lives and this strength brings me peace.

***Lord, thank you for your constant presence in seasons of hardship. You are a crutch to lean on, a chair to sit in, a visitor when we need a friend. You bring peace when we are in pieces, and I thank you for walking with me, even when I cannot. Amen.***

Frederic Blais has been attending First Baptist for two years with his wife, Kelsey, and daughter, Margot. He is a graduate of Clemson University and McGill University, works as an engineer at Michelin, and likes to spend time with his family on the Swamp Rabbit Trail.

## Thursday, December 11, 2025

Psalm 146:5-10; Ruth 1:6-18; 2 Peter 3:1-10

**L**ike a child viewing carnival rides, I stared in wonder at the scene in front of me. What I saw was not made of steel, aluminum or plastics. There were no fiber-reinforced composites, wood or other materials. No musical notes flowed forth. Bruce Springsteen's song "County Fair" was silenced.

I was mesmerized by a member of the Lythraceae family: a crepe myrtle tree. The name refers to the crinkled petals of the flowers, which resemble crepe paper. The tree had put on "quite a show" during the spring and summer months. I wasn't visually prepared for the stunning display of yellow-gold foliage.

My mood had recently been downcast. The fall season does that to me. My mother and father died during the month of November. Years have passed since their departure. Still, sadness settles like a drop of vapor on my soul.

As we approach Christmas with its religious and secular celebrations, let us be aware of the daily gifts we can give our fellow travelers on our shared earthly journey. My mother and father are no longer here. Yet they gifted me with recognizing, and savoring, hope, joy, love and peace.

Years ago, my family had hoped our loved one would be home for Christmas. Cancer doesn't abide by human timetables. When my father knew he wouldn't be leaving the hospital alive, the following was his message to me: "I want all my fellow employees welcomed at my funeral. I request that my sister play, on the piano, "Sunrise Serenade" as recorded by Glen Miller's Orchestra."

The ethnic makeup of our county was African American and white. So, I knew what he meant by all. As a child, I had watched my father sowing seeds of kindness.

His request was granted on the 30th of November, 1973 in his Baptist Church. Hope, mingled with sorrow, was my father's gift to me as I watched all fellow employees stream down the aisle.

My mother planned her funeral while in good health. She had a keen sense of humor enveloped in her love for family. She said to me and my brother, "Tell our pastor to honor my wishes: no preaching and attempting to save souls at my funeral. It is a joyful occasion."

Her request was granted on the 16th day of November, 2002 in her Baptist Church. Love, overflowing with joy, was my mother's gift to me.


***Heavenly Father, we are thankful you walk with us. Help us to keep our gaze firmly fixed on you. Guard our hearts with your peace, which surpasses all understanding. Amen.***

Peggy Thomas Sutcliffe is a native South Carolinian who feels blessed to be a member of First Baptist Greenville.

## Friday, December 12, 2025

Psalm 146:5-10; Ruth 4:13-17; 2 Peter 3:11-18

### Can God Dream?

 On December 14, the Sanctuary Choir is scheduled to sing Glenn L. Rudolph's very moving Christmas anthem, "The Dream Isaiah Saw." The text is drawn from Isaiah 11 and borrowed from an earlier hymn composed by Thomas Troeger. In this piece, Isaiah is conveying God's hope for a broken world, such that Isaiah's dream is actually God's dream for a future "Peaceable Kingdom."

The last stanza and refrain:

*Nature reordered to match God's intent,  
Nations obeying the call to repent,  
All of creation completely restored,  
Filled with the knowledge and love of the Lord.  
Little child whose bed is straw,  
Take new lodgings in my heart.  
Bring the dream Isaiah saw:  
Knowledge, wisdom, worship awe.*

I have had the opportunity to visit Cuba several times through the years. One such visit happened to be during the Christmas season. I was part of a team who traveled the island, meeting in Baptist churches, getting to know the people and worshiping alongside them. We wondered if our two countries' political differences would matter. They did not. Food was a bit different from our norm. One church hosted a Christmas banquet, complete with a whole pig roasted in a pit. When the cooked pig was placed on the table, the cooks insisted we try the *chicharrones* (pork skins), which were considered a top-notch snack. I made the mistake of complimenting them too much and was handed a second bowl which I fortunately was able to sneak, in part, to my new dog friend.

One thing that I have learned on my trips to Cuba is the transcendent power of Faith. Faith in God and one another sustains these good people through all manner of hardships. For them, it can literally mean life or death. They have taught me that through Christian community, we can move closer to God's dream of a peaceable kingdom.

***Lord, bless this community of believers and make each of us an instrument of your peace. Amen***

Cliff Christian and his wife, Jeanette, have been attending First Baptist Greenville for the past year. Cliff is a retired chaplain, and Jeanette is a retired teacher. They moved to Greenville from Asheville to be near their daughter and three young grandchildren. Cliff sings in the Sanctuary Choir and helps with the Local Relief program, and Jeanette helps with the yard sale and attends various church activities.

## Saturday, December 13, 2025

Psalm 146:5-10; 1 Samuel 2:1-8; Luke 3:1-18

When I was asked to write a devotional, I looked at the theme – God’s Peaceable Kingdom. I had a visceral reaction to say no. This year has been the least peaceful of my life between political turmoil, physical trauma and grief – nothing feels peaceful as we approach the holiday season. However, as I wondered if I could even write something meaningful, a song came over my Amazon playlist that brought forth an even bigger reaction. I sat listening, wave after wave of memories flooded me. Music brings me peace in hard times.

The holiday season approaches whether I am ready or not. I have to figure out how to make the season memorable for my children in the hard times. This will be our first without my mom, and our family will not all be together during the season. I am looking to traditions started by my mom to help us through our time of grief. I knew it was the holiday season when I would awake to the sounds of Alabama Christmas and the smells of palascintas and cookies baking. I haven’t been able to bake because baking is so intertwined with memories of my mom. My son told me he was missing his Nonnie and wondered if we could bake as a family over Thanksgiving and play music. As parents know, we will do things for our children we won’t do for ourselves, and so I searched up Alabama Christmas and began to play some of my mom’s favorites for Brentan. One stuck in my mind, and I thought it was perfect for the moment.

*Though it all looks the same  
So much has changed  
From the way it used to be  
Christmas memories  
Of happy years gone by*

*They come back to me  
And keep me warm inside  
Still those memories  
Make me cry*

I will remember the joy and love my mom put into our holiday season, enjoy Christmas memories with fondness and pass on some new memories as we find our new normal without our biggest advocate. As you read this we will hopefully be baking Russian tea cakes, snickerdoodles and gingerbread cookies to name a few and listening to Alabama Christmas remembering just how wonderful our Nonnie made the holiday season with a house full of good smells and love.

***Dear God, Please be near those whose hearts ache this holiday season. Hold them in peace when the days feel heavy and wrap them in love when the nights feel long. Let their Christmas memories bring them warmth. Surround them with love and remind them that even in sorrow, they are not alone. Amen.***

Nikki Thompson is married to Jody and they have 4 children, Chloe (18), Charlie (15), Leo (11) and Brentan (8). Nikki is a kindergarten paraprofessional and a member of the Link Class.

JOY



## Sunday, December 14, 2025

Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm 146:5-10; Luke 1:46b-55;  
James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

**T**he wilderness and the dry land shall be glad;  
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;  
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly  
and rejoice with joy and shouting.  
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,  
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.  
They shall see the glory of the Lord,  
the majesty of our God.

Strengthen the weak hands  
and make firm the feeble knees.  
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,  
"Be strong, do not fear!  
Here is your God.  
He will come with vengeance,  
with terrible recompense.  
He will come and save you."

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf shall be opened;  
then the lame shall leap like a deer,  
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.  
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness  
and streams in the desert;  
the burning sand shall become a pool  
and the thirsty ground springs of water;  
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp;  
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

A highway shall be there,  
and it shall be called the Holy Way;  
the unclean shall not travel on it,  
but it shall be for God's people;  
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.  
No lion shall be there,  
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;  
they shall not be found there,  
but the redeemed shall walk there.  
And the ransomed of the Lord shall return  
and come to Zion with singing;  
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;  
they shall obtain joy and gladness,  
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

– *Isaiah 35:1-10*

## Monday, December 15, 2025

Psalm 42; Isaiah 29:17-24; Acts 5:12-16

As Advent and Christmas approach, I often feel my childhood rise back to the surface of my imagination. The decorations, the baking, the family gatherings, and all of the treasured traditions bring with them a flood of whimsical memories. For a moment, I'm five years old again, watching the snow fall and waiting to see if Santa would come.

One tradition I tended to take for granted was the Advent calendar my mother always gives our family every year. Starting December 1, I would search for the day's number, open the tiny door, and discover what shape of chocolate waited for me. It was the highlight of my day! (I always hoped for an ornament shape; it felt wrong somehow to bite Santa's face or chew off a reindeer's antler!)

Looking back, I realize that the chocolate was never really the point. It was small, yes, but it was a daily offering of joy, a moment of sweetness in the middle of school, work and the exhausting schedule of choir rehearsals and Christmas performances. As I move further into adulthood, I'm struck by just how much those small gifts matter. Even the simplest acts can shine brightest in seasons marked by chaos, heaviness or hurt.

Isaiah 35:1-10 reminds us of this very truth. We are called and invited to bring healing, courage and joy into the "desert places" of the world – into the weary places, the fearful places, the lives of people struggling with grief, suffering or loneliness. Sometimes that calling looks grand and dramatic, but more often, it looks like a moment of kindness, a word of encouragement, a gesture of compassion. Sometimes it's as small as a piece of Advent calendar chocolate.

My hope for you in this season is that you will find light in the dark places *and* that you will also be a light, carrying mercy, grace and love into the world. This is what Advent teaches us: that God comes to us in smallness, in vulnerability, in quiet hope, and that even a tiny sign of love can transform the desert into a place of blossoming.

***Heavenly God, help us to recognize your grace in our hardships and to carry your joy into the desert places of this world. May we be bearers of hope, peace, mercy and love throughout the Advent and Christmas seasons, and in all the days that follow. In your holy name, we give you eternal thanks. Amen.***

Alexandra (Alex) Lister is 23 years old and joined FBG in June 2025. She is a member of the Sanctuary Choir, works at Furman as an Admissions Counselor, and is pursuing her M.Ed of Higher Education Administration at the University of Georgia.

## Tuesday, December 16, 2025

Psalm 42; Ezekiel 47:1-12; Jude 1:17-25

There is a moment every day where the world seems to hold its breath as the sky melts, molds, bleeds into darkness. This time of day, the sunset, is when I find myself deeply connected with my emotions and God. Our worlds move so fast that it can be easy to miss these moments where the day comes undone, but I've made a practice of being present and vulnerable to God's beauty as I watch the whole sky change.

At sunset, I'll lay down in the grass and simply be in God's presence. Some days, I'm praying, because the world is so beautiful it hurts. Some days, my cheeks burn with how much I'm smiling. Some days, I'm crying because of how painful it is to exist. Some days, I'm numb to it all.

No matter what I'm feeling, the sunset brings it all out in a burning ache.

One night, while driving back from Charleston with my friends, I was having a hard time. I was engaging in habits that pulled me away from God, I was uncomfortable in my own skin, and the more I lingered in that state of being, the harder it was for me to feel and see God and his love for me. Everything felt dark.

But then I looked out the window. There it was, the sky, bleeding and breathing and full of so much ever-changing beauty. It felt like God was urging me to open my eyes and my heart. I let out an audible gasp, soaking him in. How blessed I am to be here.

But I began to feel sad as the sky kept changing. Why is something so beautiful so impermanent? Why must this tapestry of love fade into the dark, cold night?

I could have given up hope. I could have given in to the night, but instead, I brimmed with hope because the sunset never truly leaves. No matter how dark it is for you right here in this moment, the sun is always setting somewhere in the world. God's love is right there, veiled by the darkness, but there in a holy and present tension. You just have to trust, and the sunset will come again tomorrow.

***Dear God, guide our weary souls through this dark and lonely night. Help us see your beauty walking with us in the stars that guide our path, and help us trust that your light will flood through us again. Amen.***

Tess Gandolfo is a high school junior. She loves writing, weight lifting, nature, and kickboxing. First Baptist has become her home in the last year as she has grown closer to God through worship and the Youth Family.

## Wednesday, December 17, 2025

Psalm 42; Zechariah 8:1-17; Matthew 8:14-17, 28-34

Although she never told me this herself, my mother's favorite Christmas carol must have been "The Little Drummer Boy." I figured this out when I found an old box of Christmas cards at our house after she died. She loved Christmas...loved to give gifts and bake cookies and send cards, and she kept one of each of the cards she sent each year. In the box, I noticed that several of the cards through the years were pictures of a little drummer boy. It's a simple song really, nothing special about it musically. Half of the lyrics are "rum pa pa pum" to indicate the playing of the drum. The image it conjures up, though, is beautiful in its simplicity...a young child wanting to give the newborn Messiah a gift...and having nothing to give except a musical expression of love. "I have no gift to bring...that's fit to give the King... shall I play for him on my drum?"

Through the years, I've mingled the words and idea of this carol, and the picture of the little drummer boy from those cards, with my favorite carol, "In the Bleak Midwinter," with a text by Christina Rossetti. It's the last verse that I love.

*What can I give Him, poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb.  
If I were a wise man, I would do my part,  
Yet, what can I give Him, give my heart.*

Many of us may not be poor financially this Christmas season, but many of us are "poor in spirit," grieving losses and navigating the anxiousness that surrounds us in troubling times. We may feel like we just don't have anything left to give, and this carol reminds me that the best thing we can give is our hearts, even hurting and broken ones.

\*Fun fact: Having just returned from seeing *The Sound of Music* at the Peace Center before sitting down to write this, it was interesting to find out that "The Little Drummer Boy" was first recorded by the Trapp Family Singers in 1951.

***As we search for the perfect gift to give, dear Lord, help us remember that it's our hearts that you want, whether jubilant, burdened, hopeful or broken. That's all we have to give and that's enough. Amen.***

Laura Ritter is the Minister of Music at First Baptist Greenville. She is also the Artistic Director of Young Voices of the Foothills and on the faculty at Anderson University. She and her husband, Greg, live in Clemson.

## Thursday, December 18, 2025

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; 2 Samuel 7:1-17; Galatians 3:23-29

**M**y phone parades new horrors: War, Disaster, Greed before breakfast. If I shut out the glass screen witnesses, the four horsemen don't stay at a safe distance in a third world. Famine, Plague, Fear march six hours up the road in DC, curl up in my mom's California hometown, and settle downtown, on Coffee Street.

While someone's world is ending, tinny holiday cheer crescendos around. Shopping ads, work parties, family traditions, reminders in Target tinsel of my duty to purchase, consume, do. So, now I'm at Publix, buying flowers for my niece in the Nutcracker, and Michael Bubl  is exhorting me to celebrate a Savior I can't see.

*"Joy to the world!"* The song hisses in my head, unwelcome, until it bumps against a phrase I heard from a trans artist in LA: "Trans Joy is Resistance." Liberation theology, I learned was originally coined by a black woman: "Joy is an Act of Resistance."<sup>1</sup>

I'm too tired to hail a Conqueror Prince, promising peace after our world ends. But I can understand – work beside – the rebel healer. Someone else trying to feed children, advocate for the unable, and defend dignity against a regime that tells us we should not exist. Across a thousand years and miles, a servant-teacher whispers: finding joy is a part of our radical work, not a betrayal of it.

If joy is resistance, I'll find joy.

I will sink into stained glass and old carols. Ancient traditions hold the line: centuries of peacekeepers between me and the God-man. They started our work. I was never alone.

I will eat, without apology or deferral. Every Christmas cookie, a sacrament. Take, eat, remember, believe. It is good to be fed. It is good to enjoy it.

And in my living room, where the tree's lights battle the early dark, I'll sit with the wound in my side from the double-edged sword of grief and love. He cried too.

*A Breath Prayer: Breathe in – **Joy to the world.** Breathe out – **Joy is resistance.***

Kalisse Evert is a marketer, writer and general nuisance who frequently considers joining a nunnery. They are a leader of the Bridge Sunday School and the Thursday Theology on Tap affinity group and have been attending First Baptist with their spouse, Jack, since Advent 2022.

1) Toi Derricott, "Joy is an act of resistance" *Prairie Schooner*, vol. 82 no. 3, 2008.

## Friday, December 19, 2025

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; 2 Samuel 7:18-22; Galatians 4:1-7

### Jesus' Kinfolk

“I’m expecting” should be good news. If you’re an unwed teenager, however, it can be scary. “Will my family share joy...or judgment? Will I even survive this ordeal?”

Have you ever imagined how Jesus’ grandparents reacted to Mary’s news? I have. Our oldest daughter made an identical announcement 9 years ago.

It rarely sounds good to the father of an unwed mother. When you’re a youth minister, it’s even more intimidating. My initial reaction was shock, but that was inextricably woven with disappointment and sadness.

I was disappointed that this unborn child would face an uphill climb, disappointed that my daughter might be judged...and that I would be, too. What will my church think? How can parents trust me if I let this happen to my own kid?

Unfortunately, the real disappointment was with myself because my reaction seemed so unlike that of Jesus’ grandparents. They aren’t even mentioned in scripture, so how would I know? Because sooner or later, they had to have known.

Their reaction? Grace. Any logical person would conclude this had been adultery, and the law said she should be stoned. Though they were surely shocked and disappointed, they chose another way. We ignore how Mary’s parents and family were affected those first nine months. Sure, we sometimes nod: “How scandalous it must’ve been!” But we quickly move on because we know the most important part of the story is obviously the baby.

Our daughter delivered her news in the afterglow of Christmas, so it might have been easier for us to put our disappointment in perspective. And as shocking as it was, the announcement wasn’t about us, our daughter, or nosy neighbors. It was about a baby. It was about a baby who didn’t ask for this either, but he would need lots of love and support to make it in life. And this surprising plot twist would change all our lives – whether we wanted him to or not.

Our only task? Welcome him and teach him he is a beloved child of God.

“I’m expecting” embodies the miracle of hope, love and joy God gives us, and in spite of all our faults, it carries God’s promise of new life – again and again and again.

***O God, Christmas reminds us that even when we aren’t ready, you continues to surprise us with good news, great joy, and grace. Amen.***

Steve Cothran recently retired to Greenville and rejoined FBG where he was born, raised, kicked out of youth choir with Kyle Matthews, and subsequently called to ministry. Wife, Nancy, has tolerated him for 35 years, and they are raising Andrew, their grandson.

## Saturday, December 20, 2025

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; 2 Samuel 7:23-29; John 3:31-36

The idea of a peaceable kin-dom for me was shaped around a small wooden table in the center of my paternal grandmother's kitchen. Nanny was a strong woman who became a widow with three young children in the '70s.

Despite the valleys she traveled and the scarcity she often faced, her home was a refuge for so many and was always full – cousins and aunts and uncles and second cousins and neighbors and strangers and maybe a third cousin. Some stayed for a few hours; some stayed for a few weeks. It was all the same to Nanny in her small kin-dom. We were all the same, crammed around her tiny kitchen table, sharing a meal. Family squabbles put aside, at least while Nanny was in the room. There was always enough, even when there really shouldn't have been.

No matter who you were, you were greeted with a "Hey there, sweetie! Are you hungry?" Well into her 80s, long after she was able to make meals for others, you were still sure to receive that greeting, followed by her issuing a short order to someone nearby to get a plate. I can't recall a time that I walked into her presence and didn't feel at peace. Nanny passed away in October of 2022, but so often I wonder how she did it all and crave the feeling of being in her presence.

It took me too long to realize that the peace she shared with others was never really hers. Through abuse, grief and never-ending change, Nanny found solace in her Creator. Her brown leather Bible was always near the kitchen on a little stool, its spine cracked, Shirley embossed in faded gold on the bottom right corner. Every day, she decided to pursue the good in a world that is so often dark. This joy and peace that carried her was sweeter than any treasure she held here on earth, so she shared it with everyone she could.

***Our Creator and friend, help us to give more than is comfortable and to keep a seat open at our table. May we find our joy in the things that will last beyond us and share a glimpse of a peaceable kin-dom to everyone we meet. Amen.***

Savannah French, and her husband, Jake French, have been members of First Baptist for two years. They are also members of The Bridge Class and have a daughter, Rosalie. Savannah has worked at FBG for a little over a year as the Content Creator and Senior Minister's Assistant.

# LOVE



## Sunday, December 21, 2025

Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

**A**gain the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying,

“Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.”

But Ahaz said,

“I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test.”

Then Isaiah said,

“Hear then, O house of David!

Is it too little for you to weary mortals that you weary my God also?

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign.

Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son  
and shall name him Immanuel.

He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil  
and choose the good.

For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good,  
the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.”

*-Isaiah 7:10-16*

## Monday, December 22, 2025

Luke 1:46b-55; Isaiah 33:17-22; Revelation 22:6-7, 18-20

Every Advent, Christians return to our roots. We go back to the beginning, back to the creation story, back to genesis, the birth of a new world. God's kin-dom born anew – impractically, impossibly – as a human infant designed to sleep eighteen hours a day (but only 30 minutes at a time) and be kept alive by round-the-clock feeding and care from his parents. God's second genesis is one of shocking dependence.

“Can you believe a baby changes everything?” or so the Christmas song lyric goes. Cue the laugh track of anyone who has cared for an infant! Yes, we can easily believe a baby changes everything. Parenthood thrusts us into the inverted kinship of God prophesied in Isaiah, where our posture must be self-giving instead of selfish and formed to the tender dependence of a child rather than the toughness of the adult world. Welcoming a baby both shrinks and expands the world. The world shrinks to a bassinet-sized circumference as care-giving demands all your physical and mental strength, yet it also expands outward in circles of empathy as your tolerance for violence and suffering drops precipitously. Every lost or hungry child on the news becomes your child. You hear a scared child call out, “Mama!” in a public space and startle as every mother snaps to attention, halfway out of their seat before they realize they have moved. A baby changes everything.

God entering creation as a child makes no sense to a culture and world predicated on individual grit or survival of the fittest. God arriving in a swaddled body only makes sense in a vision of a kingdom based on mutuality and interdependence. For Christ was once dependent upon us, his family. As we anticipate the coming of Christ, the holy child, let us recognize the glimmers of God's kingdom of mutual dependence blooming in every bassinet and family.

***Emmanuel; God with us, reveal yourself to us in fresh ways this Advent season. Guide us by the light of your tender mercy, that we may better love and serve you and your people in holy dependence. Amen.***

Rev. Camille Loomis Rehnborg is the Minister of Spiritual Formation and Outreach at FBG.

## Tuesday, December 23, 2025

Luke 1:46b-55; 2 Samuel 7:18, 23-29; Galatians 3:6-14

### Lovefeast's Light

The Moravian Lovefeast traces its roots to 1727 Germany, inspired by Acts 2:42-47. The tradition traveled to Wake Forest University in 1965 and eventually found me in 2005, an unsuspecting Baptist freshman not exactly searching for a new Christmas tradition.

I will never forget walking into Wait Chapel with thousands of worshipers for my first Lovefeast. A Moravian star glowed overhead. Creamed coffee and sweet buns were doled out. Tightly-held beeswax candles flickered (after the buns and coffee were consumed!), their soft light building into a warm, collective glow. The atmosphere was peaceful, holy... and I was hooked.

The Lovefeast is not a sacrament but an act of neighborly love. In the midst of hymns and scripture, simple food and drink are shared among friends and strangers. Somehow this humble tradition always nourishes my soul as much as my body.

Although distinctly Christian, the service welcomes many faith traditions. Wake Forest describes it this way: "We frame this uniquely Christian event around shared values so that the spirit of hospitality becomes a medium for creating bridges across our religious differences." As a Southerner, perhaps it's this intersection of hospitality and neighborliness that resonates most.

The service ends with "Joy to the World," candles raised high. I love the progression from the stillness of "In the Bleak Midwinter" to the triumphant proclamation that "He rules the world with truth and grace." It mirrors the Advent movement through hope, peace, joy and love and embodies the anticipation the season holds.

As Pastor Carol invites us into "generous neighborliness," I think of those buns and that coffee and of passing candlelight until the chapel glowed. I've celebrated Lovefeast in tiny post-grad apartments, on an airplane, and even in the First Baptist Greenville Fellowship Hall in 2019! This year, I'll celebrate my twentieth at home with my husband and daughter.

Around the world, Lovefeasts take many shapes: ginger beer and scones in the Caribbean, milky tea in Britain, sugarcake in Wisconsin. Where you gather and what you share is unimportant. It is about with whom you gather and why. That is what matters most and what Lovefeast teaches best.

***The Moravian motto states: In essentials, unity. In nonessentials, liberty. In all things, love. May this be our prayer, and may the warm glow of Lovefeast lead us to love our neighbors well in Advent and always. Amen.***

Lauren Luneckas is an incoming member of the Children's Committee. She and her husband, Anthony, are greeters, members of The Practice class, and new-ish "nursery hall" parents thanks to their daughter, Wells (18 months). Lauren is the CEO of The Children's Museum of the Upstate and, as you now know, a proud Demon Deacon.

## Wednesday, December 24, 2025

Psalm 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

**F**or me, the Advent season is synonymous with choral singing. Having grown up singing in church choirs and then becoming a choral music educator myself, I have always felt closest to God when singing in a choir. Some of the most meaningful and moving moments of choral singing I've experienced have not necessarily been the loud and triumphant pieces (though those are great fun to sing!), but instead the quiet, introspective and mysterious sounds of soft singing. Quiet choral singing is challenging, requiring collective focus, breath support, and control. Together, you craft musical awe and reverence in which the audience is captivated, and the space is silent enough to hear a pin drop.

A favorite childhood Christmas memory was a candlelight and carols church service that concluded with the congregation quietly singing "Silent Night" a capella in the candlelight. I remember leaving this service in silence and with a sense of serenity. Surely the shepherds in the field were overcome with a similar sense of awe and wonder on the night of Christ's birth. In my mind, the shepherds looked to the heavens and heard a choir of angels singing John Rutter's "Angels' Carol." The Advent season and the story of Christ's calm, gentle entrance to the world was the fulfillment of God's promise of peace. Last Advent season, the Sanctuary Choir sang a stirring piece called "In the Stillness" by Sally Beamish. Let Katrina Shepherd's beautiful text be your prayer:

*In the clearness of a choir that softly sings,  
In the oneness of a hush of angels' wings,  
In the mildness of a night by stable bare,  
In the quietness of a lull near cradle fair,  
There's a patience as we wait for a new morn,  
And the presence of a child soon to be born.*

Judith DeFoor is a speech-language pathologist specializing in voice, swallowing and upper airway disorders. She sings in the Sanctuary Choir along with her parents, Fred and Cindy DeFoor. She also enjoys singing in the Greenville Chorale and Herring Chamber Ensemble.

## Thursday, December 25, 2025

Isaiah 62:6-12; Psalm 97; Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:1-20

### Daydreaming About the Kingdom

“**T**he kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever.” – Revelation 11:15 (NRSV)

By some counts, Revelation is the book of the Bible most referenced in Christian music and art. John’s rich images and poetic language have inspired generations of believers to worship and long for God’s Kingdom. If you have the privilege to hear Handel’s *Messiah* this Advent, you’ll know what I mean. Drawing from Revelation 11, the Hallelujah Chorus carries us away from a troubled world to a place of peace and promise. In a way, that’s what Revelation does, as well. It offers us a daydream of hope.

In John’s vision, we see a hopeful sight: Christ returning in glory and the host of heaven accompanying him. We see Jesus confronting evil and staring down the powers of this world eye to eye. We see the Kingdom come, when heaven and earth meet.

Scripture shows us that Jesus was a dreamer, too. He dreamed about the Kingdom. We call them parables. What is the Kingdom like? Well, the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that starts small but then grows into a beautiful and fruitful tree. In the Kingdom, prodigals come home. Tax collectors and powerful people repent before the Lord and are forgiven. Pharisees and religious people who wear their self-righteousness as badges of honor are exposed as hypocrites. Who else needs to hear more about that dream?

Some might say daydreaming about the Kingdom is a sanctified way of escaping the harsh realities of this world, but I believe it’s much more than that. Dreaming about the Kingdom attunes our hearts to the values of God’s reign. We begin to recognize what is and what is not from the Kingdom. We renew our hope that our current reality is not the final word. We join with Jesus, John and generations of Christians in longing for and pressing toward the Kingdom where justice flows like a river, where every tear is wiped away, where every injustice is made right.

***Jesus, this Advent, may all our dreams be about the Kingdom. Renew our hope. Let our dreams not be idle fantasies, but active visions that shape how we live, how we love, and how we long for You. Come, Lord Jesus, come. Amen.***

Ian Hunter Dyke is seminarian at Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina. His ministry pursuits and theological education are made possible by the generous support of FBG’s theological scholarship.

# A

## Authors

Kathy Barksdale	Alex Lister
Frederic Blais	Camille Loomis Rehnborg
Cliff Christian	Lauren Luneckas
Sara Kathryn Coates	Duke McCall
Austin Connors	Michael McEntyre
Steve Cothran	David Richardson
Judith DeFoor	Laura Ritter
Ian Dyke	Jalyn Rutledge
Kalisse & Jack Evert	Peggy Sutcliffe
Savannah French	Hali Tankersley
Tess Gandolfo	Nikki Thompson

# A

## Artists

Charlie Pate, Advent Banners  
Savannah French, Cover

# E

## ditor

Kimberly W. Coates



First Baptist  
Greenville