

CENTRAL  BEARDEN
ADVENT 2024

Jesus Our Hope



Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

I Peter 1:3-5

INTRODUCTION

JESUS

OUR HOPE

This Christmas season, Central finds itself living out the definition of Advent. The word Advent means “coming.” This year Central prepares not only for the coming of Christmas, but for the coming of a new senior pastor. The Advent season is intended to be a time of hope, faith, joy, and peace, and this year there is the added excitement of what is to come: a hope in this new chapter for Central.

Our Advent theme this year is “Jesus Our Hope.” Hope is a feeling of trust and desire for something yet to happen. Much like we have hope in things to come for Central, we also have hope in Jesus for so much yet to happen in our own lives and in the lives of those we love. Hope for what is to come for Bearden, for Knoxville, for our world.

Yet while the definition of hope looks to the future, “Jesus Our Hope” is grounded in what has already happened. God became flesh in the form of a baby so that we could have a relationship with Him. The birth is the beginning of “Jesus Our Hope.” Jesus then suffered and died on the cross to claim victory over death. The birth and resurrection of the past is what makes “Jesus Our Hope” for the future.

This Advent season, use this daily devotional to see that “Hope in Jesus” - hope for you, hope for those that are hurting, hope for everyone. We pray that these daily readings will lead you to understand what Paul wrote in Romans 15:13: “May the God of Hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust Him, so that you may overflow with Hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

May we all overflow with Hope in Jesus this Advent season.

Frank Crichton
Chair of the Pastor Search Committee

JESUS OUR HOPE

THOUGHTS FROM THE ARTIST

It is only through prayer and letting go of preconceived notions of traditional elements that this work of art evolved into its final form. I eagerly said “yes” to the request to create artwork for our annual Christmas devotional. Then I was informed of the theme and promptly wondered if I had made a mistake. After all, how does one depict the shape, color and depth of HOPE? Putting my faith in God, below is what He revealed to me as I painted:

For centuries the prophets of God foretold the coming of a Messiah, giving hope to His people during challenging times. (Isaiah 9:6) This promise of hope, recorded in The Word of God, was not only for the nation of Israel, but for all of us. Even though we are sinful and deserve to be punished, God provided salvation for us, through Jesus Christ, who suffered on our behalf and freed us from our sins. Through Him, we have hope for all eternity. (John 3:16)

The Bible also records that many doubted Jesus was the Promised One. However, God the Father confirmed his identity.

“As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” Matthew 3: 16-17

Every generation, those who have faith have seen the sunrise of God.

“In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. ... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:4-14).

God sent us his Son and God is ready to receive us into the kingdom of heaven. May you find hope and purpose for living for Christ each new day in the shapes, colors and composition of this artwork.

Lisa Stockton

THE SEASON OF ADVENT CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS AT CENTRAL BEARDEN

When I was called to become the Senior Pastor of Central Bearden in August 1986, I was impressed with the many wonderful traditions at Central, especially during the Season of Advent when we prepared for the celebration of the Incarnation (Jesus becoming flesh and dwelling among us). God became human to show us how to live without sin and became that perfect sacrifice on the Cross to become our substitute. His glorious Resurrection gives us the hope and assurance of eternal life.

Christmas Devotional Guide

The late Mack Bingham, who served as our Minister of Education for many years, had a vision of a booklet that would provide a devotional guide written by church members for each day of Advent and would include a calendar of special events for the Advent season. Mack's vision became a reality in 1979. This is now the 45th edition of Central's Christmas Devotional. To name all the members who have contributed to this wonderful project each year would be too numerous to list.

Christmas Mission Giving

This time of the year has traditionally been a time to focus on International Mission giving to the Lottie Moon Offering through the Southern Baptist Convention and the Global Missions Offering through the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. In addition, there are other worthy causes that Central supports.

Christmas Decorations

Following the Thanksgiving holiday, a dedicated group of lay and staff members will begin to decorate the Worship Center. When you enter on the first Sunday in December, you will know it is Christmas at Central. The sanctuary is filled with decorations of the season. The Advent Wreath is placed ready for lighting. Our Chrismon Tree is decorated with white and gold Christian symbols made by women in the church symbolizing His Majesty and Glory and with lights which point to Christ who is the Light of the World. Poinsettia plants purchased in honor or memory of a loved one or friend are built into a Poinsettia Tree at the front of the Sanctuary.

Christmas Music

Each worship experience in December features traditional Carols and other songs related to the birth of the Christ Child. On Sunday, December 15th, our Adult Choir will present "Hope Has Come – Christmas at Central," a musical program for our church and the community. One of our most memorable musical traditions is the singing of *Silent Night* at the end of our Christmas Eve service.

Advent Wreath

Lighting of the Candles in the Advent Wreath is a tradition for each Sunday of Advent. One or more church families come forward to light a candle each week representing Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. It is so refreshing to observe children and young people willing to participate by reading Scripture or leading in prayer with their parents.

Christmas Eve Vesper Service

During my time at Central, some years we have had two Christmas Eve services and others only one. Scheduling the number of services is always done thoughtfully and prayerfully to ensure that no one will be turned away because, using a Biblical term, “There is no room for them in the Inn.” I am blown away by the dedication and sacrifice of the staff members, choir members, accompanists, and other musicians as well as several Deacons and Ushers who were always willing to serve regardless of whether we had one service or two.

It has been a tradition at our church to experience a meaningful worship experience on Christmas Eve that will include the celebration of the birth of the Christ Child but also be a reminder that He became “the Lamb that takes away the sins of the world” with His death on the Cross. That is why we invite all Christians to join us in the observance of the Lord’s Supper.

Perhaps, one of the most memorable and sacred traditions in our Christmas Eve service was the lighting of candles followed by the singing of Silent Night. The Christ Candle was lit, and from the Christ Candle, the light was shared with Deacons who then shared the light with the congregation. We would then conclude with the singing of Silent Night, lifting our candles higher and higher as the lights were gradually dimmed until the last verse when the only light remaining was the light of the candles, and a beautiful glow would fill the room. I was able to stand on the platform over 40 times and bask in that glow. These memories will always be special to me.

And Finally – *It has been my joy and privilege to take a trip down memory lane and share my reflections about the Season of Advent at Central Bearden. For the 36th consecutive year, I will join my church family for that special Worship experience on Christmas Eve. As we face a new year, 2025, and continue to seek our new Senior Pastor, my prayer will be that we will demonstrate the love of God, the peace of Christ, and the leadership of the Holy Spirit in our personal lives and in our church family.*

Dr. Larry Fields
Senior Pastor (1986-2009)
Pastor Emeritus (2010 – present)

MISSIONS JESUS OUR HOPE

And His name will be the Hope of All the World.
Matthew 12:21 NLT

Since 1845, Baptists have been on a journey to ***Share the Hope of Jesus***, to ***Make Disciples***, and to ***Plant Churches*** in places where Jesus is not yet known. As believers and Baptists, we take the Great Commission in Matthew 28 very seriously. Our hope is that our pursuit of making disciples will culminate with the great multitude in Revelation 7:9-10, "I saw a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb... and they were shouting with a great roar, 'Salvation comes from our God who sits on the throne and from the Lamb!'"

In 2023 your gifts to Central's World Missions offering were combined with both CBF and SBC churches around the nation and used by our missionaries and field personnel to give Jesus, Our Hope to the nations. Last year over 879,000 international people heard the gospel, 141,000 believed, and 116,000 were baptized.

Yet in 2024, billions of people are still unreached, LOST, still waiting for the chance to hear the name of Jesus and place their Hope in Him. Lostness is not just a statistic; it is an eternal reality for billions of souls. But amidst the challenges of reaching the Lost, there is Hope, and that Hope is our unwavering belief in the transformative power of the Gospel. You are called to play your part in this Hope. Whether you pray fervently, give generously, go boldly, or send faithfully, your role is vital for sharing the Gospel with the Lost so that they will know that Jesus is their HOPE.

Join us in solving the greatest problem in the world: LOSTNESS! Together we can spread the message of ***Hope*** and ***Salvation*** to every tribe and tongue. Give to the World Missions Offering and enable our missionaries to spread the Good News to the world.

Central's World Missions Offering Goal is \$105,000. Help share "Jesus, Our Hope" this Christmas: Give, Pray, Go!

Tim Earl
Minister of Missions and Engagement

AND YOUR GIFT GOES ON

God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another... Then everything you do will bring glory to God through Jesus Christ. All glory and power to him forever and ever! Amen.

1 Peter 4:10-11

During the season of Advent, we as a church promote a very special “World Missions Offering” that is used by our mission agencies, with the CBF and SBC, to directly support our Field Personnel and Missionaries serving around the globe. But our support for missions and ministry does not end there. Every week during the year, when you give to our church budget a percentage of those funds goes directly to ministries, agencies and missions here in Knoxville and around the world. Because of your faithful support to Central Bearden we are able to share in the on-going ministries of the following groups.

Global Mission Partners in the following countries: Lebanon, Central Asia, Haiti, Mauritania, Greece, Thailand, Russia, Canada, The “Stans”, Egypt, South Africa, Colombia, Guatemala, North Africa, Italy and Operation Christmas Child Shoeboxes countries.

State/National Mission Partners

Your monetary gifts, as well as many volunteer hours, go to help support these partners: Water Mission, Appalachian Ministries of the Smokies, Maryville College InterVarsity, Capital Commission – Nashville, TN Baptist Children’s Home, TN Baptist Adult Homes, Mission trip funding for our College and Youth ministries.

Local Mission Partners

And finally, because you give to the general budget, we as a church help support many local agencies and ministries in the name of Christ where many of you serve: The Knox County Association of Baptists, Baptist Ministry Centers at Western Heights and Montgomery Village, UTK Baptist Colligate Ministry, CB Fish Ministry, the Lighthouse at Austin Holms, Samaritan Ministry, Welcome House Knoxville – Sunny Ikojoh and Cindy Hood, Pro-Dads Bearden Elementary, Tu Dia, CB Habitat builds, Care Cuts, Compassion Coalition, Knoxville International Network (KIN), FOCUS, Emerald Youth, Interfaith Health Clinic, Christian Men’s Job Corp., Arabic Church Knoxville, Imani Church, A Hand Up for Women, Mission of Hope, YOKE, CHOP, Operation InAsMuch, KICKO, Community Tutoring, FCA, Hope Resource Center, KARM, Family Promise, Volunteer Ministry Center, Cedar Brook Furniture Ministry, Knoxville Leadership Foundation, Thrive, Joni and Friends Camp, and Campus Crusade for Christ International Ministry at UTK. Many of these agencies hold meetings, banquets, and have office space at Central Bearden.

Your financial gifts to the budget go on and on and on in bringing “Jesus, Our Hope” to Knoxville and our nation. Thank You!

Kelly Rose and Tim Earl

WELCOME HOUSE KNOXVILLE

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.

They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.

Revelation 7:9

Welcome House Knoxville (WHK) shares the love of Jesus through the ministries of hospitality and friendship by providing temporary housing.

We HOPE to provide a respite!

There were 117 million forcibly displaced persons around the world as of the end of 2023 and 40% are children. They flee the same dangers that forced Joseph, Mary, and Baby Jesus to go to Egypt. Matthew 25 is clear that the way we treat “the least of these” is actually our response to Jesus Himself.

They only HOPE for survival!

Over 43 million of these are refugees. Shockingly, **1 in every 69 people on earth has fled their home** as a result of conflict or persecution. (www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/who-we-are/figures-gance)

They HOPE for a new home!

We cannot help them all, but we can welcome those who come to Knoxville. God is sovereign and migration is part of HIS redemptive plan. Acts 17:26-27 says God determines the **exact places** where we should live including Knoxville, TN!



Welcome House Belle Morris

We share the HOPE found only in Jesus!

WHK's first location is a rented church property near UT campus. Thanks to Central Bearden, it opened in August of 2019 but is not enough. Safe and affordable housing is a crisis in Knoxville as in most cities. As of May 2024, we purchased a second house in Belle Morris which is open and expanded our capacity by 4 units. This is a giant step of faith to purchase a large property, but Radical Hospitality is needed!

We HOPE to love our new neighbors!

Since 2019, WHK has welcomed 88 guests (46 kids) including 11 single-mom families. Guests have represented parts of Africa, Vietnam, Turkmenistan, Mexico, Venezuela, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and Egypt. The Minister of Hospitality, Sunny Ikojoh, lives at the first house and provides daily contact and assistance as needed. Our new house also has a House Host living onsite to act as community and family. In Revelation 7:9 there is a great multitude in heaven from every nation, tribe, people, and language before the throne. ALL people are God's image bearers.



Welcome House Kingston Pike

We HOPE to practice God's Kingdom on Earth as it is in Heaven!

Please follow Welcome House Knoxville on Facebook to find updates and specific needs.

Jesus, you are the only true HOPE in a world full of chaos and war. Make us instruments of PEACE in all we do to help others. Give us JOY beyond our earthly possessions and homes. Thank you for becoming a helpless baby to demonstrate God's LOVE for all mankind.

Cindy Hood

PROLOGUE

THE HOPE OF GLORY!

*God has chosen to reveal the GLORIOUS RICHES of this MYSTERY,
which is
CHRIST IN YOU,
THE HOPE OF GLORY*
Colossians 1:27 (paraphrase)

Have we lost the WONDER, the MYSTERY, and the HOPE the first Christmas brought to this world? Do you remember the *Anticipation*, the *Expectation*, and perhaps some *Mystery* of your first or another special Christmas?

I remember looking through catalogs' weeks and sometimes months before Christmas. I circled and wished for certain gifts. Sometimes I would express my hope to a parent and their response would be "Ask Santa Claus! "On Christmas day, gifts were wrapped and under the tree. Sometimes a gift was hidden because it was too big for wrapping paper or a box. The night before Christmas was especially filled with anticipation, expectation, and hope. The mystery and intrigue were there as I saw what was already under the tree. I knew there was even more to come during the night when "Santa" would come! All of this expectation and hope for gifts that would be worn out, bored with, sometimes disappointed by, or enjoyed only for a short time.

ADVENT is a noun which means "**arrival**", the "**coming**" of a person, thing, or event. The Season of Advent is a time for waiting, expecting, looking forward to, wondering, and HOPING! For Christians, the wait is for the birth - the birthday of Jesus. If Christ has been born IN us, then Christmas is also a time of *Worship!*

Colossians 1:24-28 describes a servant *Suffering* to tell others about a *Mystery* – a *Gift* kept hidden for ages and generations. That *Gift* is now given or opened to those who will receive the *Gift!* The persons receiving this mysterious *Gift* are called "Saints." Saints are persons who are holy, set apart, pure, and blameless. This is not by their own nature or good works but by *Faith* and *Trust* in God's *Mercy* and *Grace*. JESUS IS THAT GIFT, *the Mystery Solved*, and the *Fulfillment of All that was HOPED for, for Ages and Generations!*

This passage is about *Glorious Riches* - not temporal, material gifts that will rust, wear out, and disappoint! Jesus is a *Gift* and *Hope* that will not disappoint! These words describe a *gift* that is not just given TO us, or to be WITH us. That would be enough, but this *Gift* will live IN us! This *Gift* - the *Glorious Riches*, this *Hope of Glory* - is "CHRIST IN YOU!"

Don't let this Christmas Season be the "same ole, same ole." Go deeper, Dig deeper! Don't get lost in this world's shallow, temporal expectations. Let's start this ADVENT Season by singing the hymn "Higher Ground" and set our sights higher than this world's stuff and activities. Set aside time each day alone or with family to read and discuss the devotionals in this *Advent Devotional Guide*. Begin by sharing expectations and hopes for THIS CHRISTMAS. As saints, as people of faith, as Christians, as members of Central Bearden, let us also meet *together* for study and worship. Together we will contemplate, celebrate, and share the mystery, the wonder, and the HOPE of "God with Us" and "Christ in US"!

Lord, Lift us up and help us see and stand on HIGHER GROUND... We want to live above this world... Our faith has caught the joyful sound, the song of saints on HIGHER GROUND... We're pressing on the Upward Way... New Heights to gain every day including this Christmas! We pray and hope till Heaven is found, Lord plant our feet on HIGHER GROUND. In Jesus Name! Amen.

Mark Moreland
Minister of Pastoral Care

HIGHER GROUND



1. I'm press - ing on the up - ward way, New heights I'm
2. My heart has no de - sire to stay Where doubts a -
3. I want to live a - bove the world, Tho' Sa - tan's
4. I want to scale the ut - most height, And catch a

gain - ing ev - 'ry day; Still pray - ing as I'm on - ward
rise and fears dis - may; Tho' some may dwell where these a - ful
darts at me are hurried; For faith has caught the joy - ful
gleam of glo - ry bright; But still I'll pray till heav'n I've

bound, "Lord, plant my feet on high - er ground."
bound, My prayer, my aim is high - er ground.
sound, The song of saints on high - er ground.
found, "Lord, lead me on to high - er ground."

Chorus

Lord, lift me up and let me stand, By faith, on heav - en's ta - ble - land,
A high - er plane than I have found; Lord, plant my feet on high - er ground.

Hope



*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that
whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.
John 3:16*

DECEMBER 1

HOPE

But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.

1 Thessalonians 5:8 NIV

As we gather on the first Sunday of Advent, we are reflecting on the theme of hope. Advent marks the beginning of our journey towards the celebration of Christ's birth and the anticipation of His return. In Thessalonians, Paul encourages us to wear a breastplate of faith and love and a helmet covering us with the hope of salvation.

Hope is a powerful force, especially in times of transitions or turmoil. It is not a fleeting wish, but it is a confident expectation and knowledge that is based on our past experiences with God and his promises.

As we light our first candle, we are focusing on the light that Hope based on Christ brings to our lives. This light overcomes the darkness and negative thoughts and guides us forward.

Paul's metaphor of the breastplate and helmet speaks to the protective nature of faith, love, and hope. Just as armor protects a soldier, our faith and love shield us from despair while our helmet guards our minds against fear and doubt.

During this Advent season, reach out to someone who might be struggling or feeling helpless. Offer a word of encouragement, a helping hand, or simply a listening ear. Let your actions reflect the hope that sustains you and allows you to be a beacon of light to someone who needs it.

Heavenly Father, as we begin Advent, we thank You for the hope that we have in Jesus. Help us to put on the breastplate of faith and love and the helmet of the hope of salvation. Strengthen our hearts and guide us to live as children of light. May our hope in You shine brightly in a world that desperately needs Your love and salvation. Use us to bring hope to others and to draw us closer to You each day. Amen.

Kelly Rose
Executive Pastor

DECEMBER 2

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then He said "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

Revelation 21:4-5 NIV

Hope for Tomorrow

Trustworthy and true... do you believe in God's promises? An old hymn comes to mind and I can hear my Dad singing loud and clear in his baritone voice on the chorus of "Standing on the Promises of God." My earthly Father was a gift and a huge Christian influence on my life, and I am forever grateful and blessed. But I have a Heavenly Father who made the Way that we may all be a part of His eternal family. We may rest in our Savior daily as scripture shares from Genesis through Revelation that He gave His son to give us life and He always keeps His promises. The words from God to John in the book of Revelation were not just for the first century church but I also believe for us today. This scripture may encourage each of us to remain faithful to the Lord and not give in to the pressures and temptations of this world. We can have hope as we anxiously await Jesus' return and find joy and comfort in knowing He will make ALL THINGS NEW! This season of Advent may be a difficult time for you but stand on His promises. The infant's birth we celebrate leads to our hope and victory over death and sin. He is in control and He keeps His promises.

Dear Father, help us to know you deeper and grow our faith during this season. Help us rest and stand firmly on Your promises. Amen.

Angie Johnson

DECEMBER 3

Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

This is a great verse. However, have you ever thought about how difficult it is to practice continually? Sometimes it is hard to be joyful, particularly when you look around this world. We see conflict, wars, disease and famine, corruption in government officials, division among ourselves, hatred, and devastating natural disasters such as the one we recently experienced – one that ravaged towns and took many lives.

But this is where the second part of the verse is important... to pray continually. Once we fully accept that God is in control of all things, we can turn to Him with a new perspective. This doesn't mean we understand why things happen, but we can give thanks that He is in charge overall. That He has a plan for all of us. In other words, He's got this. As difficult as that may be at times, even in the loss of a loved one, He is still with us. He provides a comforter through the Holy Spirit. He gives us hope.

During a particularly dark time in my life, I was reminded of a quote by a dear friend, Wendell Boertje, who told me, "Ed, this is where your faith comes in." With faith comes hope. That realization comforted me through those months.

Yes, there is pain and grief, but there is also comfort, knowing that, as David stated in Psalm 23, "... thou art with me." He is going through it with us. This is where we give thanks continually for the Holy Spirit guiding us through whatever we face. He never turns his back on us, and we should never turn our back on Him. In spite of adversity, our faith should be made even stronger. As believers, we can always have hope.

Ed Thrift

DECEMBER 4

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people.

Ephesians 1:18 NIV

I was a rather literal-minded child, and the words I heard in church were sometimes confusing. Would it not hurt terribly to have Jesus in your heart, and how does He fit in there anyway? In Ephesians 1:18, “eyes of your heart” is another odd phrase when you first read it.

We think of the heart as the seat of emotion, but in scripture “heart” refers to the whole inner person - feelings, yes, but also reason, will, and understanding. Indeed, some translations render this phrase “eyes of your understanding.”

The hope of God's calling can be two-fold. First, there is hope in the fact that we are called by God - called to a personal relationship with Him and called to a specific purpose. God has a plan for each of us and stands ready to equip us to accomplish it.

Second, God calls us to hope. The hope God calls us to is not just a feeling, a fancy, or a wish. It is a determination and a choice, something to be actively pursued with confidence and trust in Him. It can be hard to hope when the worries of life press in and threaten to overwhelm us.

Pray that God will open the eyes of your heart to fill your innermost being with light. Choose hope.

Melanie Kirkham

DECEMBER 5

Why am I discouraged? Why is my heart so sad? I will put my hope in God! I will praise Him again – my Savior and my God!

Psalm 42:10 NLT

I have been employed at a local hospital for seven years and love my job! One day this year an unexpected incident happened, and I became upset - which is out of character for me. Just not me at all! I was asked to take a leave while the hospital evaluated what happened. My heart was so discouraged and upset. I was afraid I would lose my job. I prayed to God that He would get me through it.

During this time, I asked for forgiveness. I acknowledged my mistake to my boss and to God. I hoped that the other person would be compassionate toward me. The compassion never came.

Putting my hope in my parents' help and support took a lot of the burden off me day after day as I waited. After what seemed a long time, I got my job back and I now work in an area where I can meet other co-workers and learn new job skills.

But overall, God did the main work in me to help me not be afraid in hard times, not to be bitter when I do not understand, not to be depressed when things are not clear to me because God promises that He will work things to THE MAX!

HE DID AND I PRAISE HIM!!!

God, I want to thank you for helping me get my job and for having my parents and friends in my life. Amen.

Ben Geisel
Uniquely Growing in Christ Class Member

DECEMBER 6

*Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance
about what we do not see.*

Hebrews 11:1 NIV

What is hope, in reality? Some other words for hope can be *wish*, *wait for*, or *trust*. How do these words translate to our hope in Jesus?

There are many reasons in our world today to feel a sense of hopelessness. Worry seems constant for everyone - from the state of our country and world to the direction of our churches, all the way down to personal worry about our families and individual households. We sing "My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness" on Sunday mornings, and we mean every word sincerely. We gather with fellow believers and bear each other's burdens as instructed by Christ (Galatians 6:2). Then we leave the church building and our hopefulness is immediately challenged. How do we hold on to our hope in Jesus when we face a world and future that seems so very fragile?

As Christians, we believe that we already know the end of the story. We can have hope because through Jesus, God's plan for humans to live with Him for eternity has already been enacted. Striving to remember this daily can be a great challenge. We must actively seek to remain hopeful through prayer, study, and song. True hope, not just optimism, is not easy. This is where faith must weave into our struggle for hope. Because we cannot know or understand every facet of God's plan, faith is required to remain hopeful and remind ourselves that we do know the end of the story - God will take care of us in ways we cannot possibly imagine or foresee.

As we anticipate Advent and the birth of the Christ child, I pray we will do our best to remember not only this beginning, but the things to come, and the way that God will take care of us through it all. Let us remember the words of the song "Living Hope" by Phil Wickham.

"Then through the darkness, Your loving-kindness
Tore through the shadows of my soul
The work is finished, the end is written
Jesus Christ, my living hope."

Praise God for Jesus Christ, our living hope. Amen.

Amy Tucker

DECEMBER 7

Let us hold unwaveringly to the HOPE we profess, for HE who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Hebrews 10:23-25 NIV

“Hope springs eternal” is an earthly saying, but as believers, we truly have God’s promise of HOPE! In this Christmas season, we need to slow down and reflect on His promise. He is always available to us in prayer as our rock and deliverer. He gives us a future of joy and peace – a day when Jesus will return for us to live with Him forever in heaven.

As we gather with family and friends to celebrate Christmas, let us remember its true meaning - to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Christianity is not a faith to be lived out alone. Paul encourages us not only to meet together but to make it a habit. When believers gather together, we are told to encourage one another in love and good deeds and in our HOPE in God. Can you imagine how the early Christians felt as their numbers were so few in the beginning? Like them, we must remain connected to one another so that life’s pressures don’t pull us away from our faith.

God calls us to love and encourage each other, spurring each other on as we hold tight to the HOPE He gives us. How inventive can we be in helping and lifting others up, not only during this season but all year? You never know when non-believers are watching and will find Jesus in us. During this Christmas season, let us share the great assurance of HOPE that we have been given! God is faithful and keeps His promises. As we celebrate Jesus’ birth, celebrate His promise of eternal life in heaven with Him!

Lord—Help us to hold fast to the confession of our HOPE without wavering, trusting in Your faithfulness to fulfill the promises You have made to us. Help us to be encouragers to others as we get together and to keep that HOPE in our hearts and minds all year long.

Debbie Smith

Peace

I Heard The Bells On Christmas Day

CHRISTMAS

Words: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1864.
 Music: 'Waltham (Calkin)' John B. Calkin, 1872. Setting: "The Book of Common Praise", 1885.
 copyright: public domain. This score is a part of the Open Hymnal Project, 2006 Revision.

♩ = 100

1. I heard the bells on Christ - - mas day Their
 2. And thought how, as the day had come, The
 3. Till ring - - ing, sing - ing on its way The
 4. And in des - pair I bowed my head "There
 5. Then pealed the bells more loud and deep: "God

old fa - - mil - iar car - - ols play, And wild and sweet
 bel - fries of all Christ - en - dom Had rolled a - long
 world re - volved from night to day, A voice, a chime,
 is no peace on earth," I said, "For hate is strong
 is not dead, nor doth He sleep; The wrong shall fail,"

the words re - peat Of peace on earth, good will to men.
 th'un - - bro - ken song Of peace on earth, good will to men.
 a chant sub - lime Of peace on earth, good will to men.
 and mocks the song Of peace on earth, good will to men."
 the right pre - vail With peace on earth, good will to men."

DECEMBER 8

PEACE

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Isaiah 9:6 NIV

For the second Sunday of Advent, we light the candle of Peace. We are reminded of the Peace that Christ brings. This peace is more than the absence of conflict, it is the presence of God's wholeness, His shalom, which brings calm to our souls and reconciliation in all things. In our present time, HIS shalom can be hard to understand, but take heart, the prophet Isaiah spoke about this peace in Isaiah 9:6.

Jesus, the Prince of Peace, entered a world filled with turmoil and division, not unlike our world today. Yet, His birth signified the coming of a peace that surpasses all understanding. Through His life, death, and resurrection, He made a way for us to be reconciled with God and to experience true peace in our hearts. He is the ultimate Shalom. He is the Prince of Peace.

This Advent season, many of us may be longing for peace in different areas of our lives. Peace in relationships, peace amidst uncertainty, or peace within ourselves. Jesus offers us this peace, not as the world gives, but as only He can.

In John 14:27, Jesus tells His disciples, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

As we reflect on this promise, let us remember that Christ's peace is available to us even in the midst of life's challenges. It is a peace that calms our fears, anchors us in God's love, and empowers us to live as peacemakers in the world.

This Advent let the peace of Christ reign in your heart. As we wait for His coming, may we share the peace offered to us through Christ with those around us, knowing that through Him, all things will one day be made whole and we will see true Peace.

Amy Brock
Interim Director of College Students

DECEMBER 9

“However, as it is written: What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human has conceived – the things God has prepared for those who love Him.

I Corinthians 2:9 NIV

As a little girl, I clearly remember the days leading up to Christmas as the most exciting and yet mysterious days of my life. By the time Christmas Eve came, I was just beside myself wondering what Santa would bring me and what gifts my parents had for me. Being a Daddy’s girl, I would beg Daddy to give me hints or play the game “Hot and Cold” to help me find just one gift from Daddy and Mother. Deep inside, I already knew that I would not get the answers until Christmas morning!

So it is for those of us who are followers of Jesus in that we want so much to know just what is ahead for us in this life and in eternity.

Understanding the character and love of God remains a mystery. Over the years, I have striven to know and understand the thoughts and plans of God for myself, my family, my dearly loved USA, and the world. I have read my Bible, studied the culture, words, historical accounts, and books written by theologians, and yet, much still is unknown to me and even to my dear Bible teacher and theologian, Joyce Wyatt.

God’s revelation of Himself, His Son Jesus, and the Holy Spirit remains more than any of us through reading and study can ever even imagine. Our humanness is our home that limits us through our senses and learning limitations.

The plans and love of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are limitless and more lovely, fragrant, bountiful, peaceful, and eternal than we can conceive. God will reveal all that He was, is, and will be at exactly the right time! It takes my breath away!!!

Nancy Reeves

DECEMBER 10

*But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not
grow weary; they will walk and not be faint.*

Isaiah 40:31 NIV

The Lord refreshes our souls and our hope. When we put our trust in Him and Him alone, we can do all things.

Christmas is a time of wonderful joy and celebration. A time to thank the Lord for the goodness and grace we have received from His hands. Hard times can also be present. We might feel discouraged about something or heartbroken over a loss.

In Isaiah 40, Isaiah speaks to the Israelites who have been held captive by Babylon because they rebelled and refused to trust the Lord. He tells them about the coming of the Lord and how man cannot compare to Him. He also tells them that the Lord never grows tired, He provides us with strength, and His understanding has no limit. He is Lord over all.

The main theme from this chapter is comfort. In the Bible, comfort not only means help and providing relief but also encouragement in times of need. God provides us with hope from the greatest gift, Jesus, to save us from our sins. With the hope of the Lord, we can do and overcome anything. We gain hope from the comforts of the Lord. Seek the Lord for encouragement and rescue. Read His Word for a reminder of His miracles made true by His works.

The Lord calls for us to trust Him. To be there for others. To be a reminder of His love for all of us.

Dear Lord, thank you for the joy and hope that you have given us with your gift. Help us to know that we are not alone, that you are there comforting us in every moment. Help us to have unfaltering faith in knowing that. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Eliza Thackston

DECEMBER 11

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Matthew 11:28-30 NIV

How do we find “hope” when we are weary and laden with heavy burdens? Hope looks forward to a better and more desirable situation. The idea of a heavy burden that needs a yoke designed for oxen to wear is more than any of us wishes to carry with us daily. It is wearisome. Jesus states that when we take his “yoke” upon us it is easy and we can learn from it.

The wearing of Jesus’ yoke aligns us perfectly with his plans and purposes. His yoke lightens our load because it is a shared resolution to our burdens and brings us the desired hope we have for the future. The wearing of Jesus’ yoke also gives us peace about the meaningless, wearisome toil of our daily lives. Jesus’ yoke turns our toil into spiritual productivity and purpose. The hope we desire in wearing Jesus’ yoke strengthens us with the desire to show others how partnering with Jesus eases their wearisome burdens and the cycle of faith continues.

Lord, You do lighten our heavy burdens and give us rest when we take Your yoke upon us and learn from You. Help us to live lives that reflect the hope of Your spirit to those around us so they may desire a relationship with You. In Your name Jesus. Amen.

Marty Smith

DECEMBER 12

*Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there
are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the
LORD, I will be joyful in God my savior.
Habakkuk 3:17-18 NIV*

About 600 years before the birth of Jesus, Habakkuk saw the Babylonian military threatening Jerusalem. (They would later conquer Jerusalem, burn it to the ground, kill many, deport many others, and destroy the temple.) He saw this army as especially cruel. They killed just because they could get away with it. Habakkuk could not understand this injustice. We often see injustice all around us and, at times, ask God the same questions Habakkuk asked. Why is God silent? Why does God allow suffering? Why do “good” people suffer so much while the “bad” people get rewarded for their bad behavior? In some ways, it seems the more things change, the more they remain the same. The basic problem of humanity is sin. This is true today as it was in the Garden of Eden.

The Lord spoke and reassured Habakkuk so he wrote, “For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.” (Habakkuk 2:14) This is, in part, the prophecy of the good news that a Savior is born.

Habakkuk had hope. Circumstances did not matter. He trusted God no matter what. He was assured that in the end, justice would prevail and people would be saved from sin and its consequences. And he was not merely hopeful, but he was also joyful. Hallelujah!

*Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for giving us hope that never fades.
Amen.*

Adney Cross

DECEMBER 13

*Even to your old age and gray hairs I am He who will
sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you;
I will sustain you and I will rescue you.*
Isaiah 46:4 NIV

As I stand and look in the mirror, I see white hair. As I walk down the steps or along the long walkway, I falter and tire because of limited mobility. As I participate in the usual activities of my life, I lose energy and must pull back and say no I can't do that. What is happening to me? How has this aging process caught up with me and affected my life in what seems like such a short time? Why me, Lord? Why can't I look the same as I did at 40, 50, even 60? Why can't I move the same way and do all the things I have always done? Is there any hope for the days and months ahead? Can I still be useful and enjoy life?

The truth is that aging happens to all of us. It is more obvious on some of us than others, but it is better than the alternative – not being around at all. How can we best deal with this stage in our lives and still find hope and joy in each day?

As my friend Sally said in a devotional she sent to me, the beautiful truth is that our spirituality often deepens as we age, providing comfort, hope, and peace of mind in the face of life's inevitable challenges. Engaging in spiritual practices, such as prayer and meditation, improves self-esteem and provides a more hopeful outlook for spiritual growth. Someone said that the only people who pray well are those who keep trying to pray. As we pray and seek God's presence, we gain the capacity to be happy and full of joy knowing that God has promised to always be with us and continue to provide for us even as we age. "So, we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day." (2 Corinthians 4:16)

Heavenly Father, grant me the strength to grow spiritually with age, to find peace in Your wisdom, and to deepen my connection with You as I journey through life.

Susan Fendley

DECEMBER 14

*And I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel.*

Genesis 3:15 NIV

In this season of hope, giving, and kindness, we are quick to point out the good parts of humanity. Our generosity. Our caring spirit. Our bleeding hearts. But one of the first stories ever written about us is our failure. Genesis 1 and 2 detail the glory and care with which God spoke our world into being. In stark contrast, the heading over Genesis 3 is "*The Fall*." How bleak. Nothing has even happened yet, and we fall. But in Genesis 3:15 comes an incredible story of hope. This verse and the one before it are laid out in poetic prose set apart from the rest of the text.

This is the curse of the serpent, a prophecy spoken upon it by the Father. This passage even has its own name: The Protoevangelium which is derived from two Greek words - protos, meaning first, and evangelion, meaning good news. Thus unfolds the first mention of Jesus. Before God turns His face to the man and woman to tell them what their punishment is, before we even knew what we needed saving from, the Savior was born. Well, not literally. But it's there in the text. "He will crush your head." *Crush*. Again, Adam and Eve have not even been told of the consequences of their actions, and the serpent is already doomed. "You will strike his heel." A pathetic effort. And yet, the snake probably felt triumphant as it landed a bite. The Savior of the world hung on a cross, dead. But we know, having read the end of this story at the very beginning of the book, that the end has not yet come. The good news stretches across the many books of the Bible, tying together our failure and our salvation in a beautiful way.

Father, thank You for the promise of Your Son. Thank You that before we even knew what we needed saving from, You provided a way. Help us to rest in the hope of Your promises, knowing that You will never leave or forsake us and that You are faithful to complete Your good work in us.

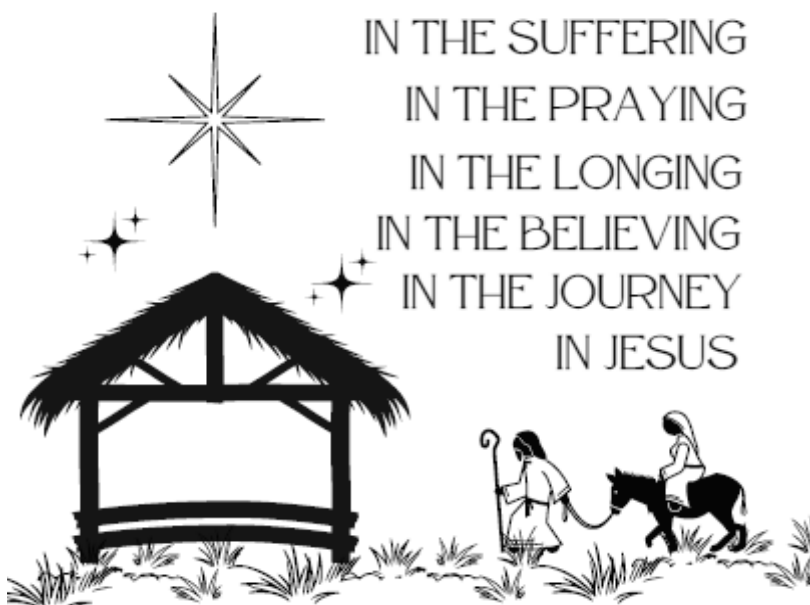
Allison Lamm

THERE IS

Joy



IN THE WAITING
IN THE SUFFERING
IN THE PRAYING
IN THE LONGING
IN THE BELIEVING
IN THE JOURNEY
IN JESUS



Erin Ogle, Artist

DECEMBER 15

JOY

In the same region, shepherds were staying out in the fields and keeping watch at night over their flock. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Don't be afraid, for look, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people."

Luke 2:8-10 CSB

What is J-O-Y? We often minimize this word to be a feeling of happiness. Yes, joy can be that feeling, but it is so much more! The Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible defines Joy as this: "A positive human condition that can be either feeling or action."¹ So while joy can be a feeling, it is one that is not limited to happiness! Joy can be experienced in both good times and bad. In struggle and success. Joy is a gift from God that comes through the baby that was born on Christmas. The Shepherds were in the fields that night – the lowest of the low in cultural hierarchy – but the first announcement came to them, a proclamation of good news and great JOY.

When we experience Joy in our lives, which is given to us from God, it should move us to act – to tell others of what God is doing, to share the experiences we have. That is exactly what the shepherds did. They received the message of joy from the angels – they ran to meet baby Jesus, then they went and told everyone who would listen.

As you celebrate the birth of Jesus in 2024, look for where God is giving you joy. Embrace it and then share it with others. I have been telling our students the following statement a lot recently, and the same is true for you – Your story is powerful in the hands of God. So go and share the joy you receive with everyone you encounter.

Nick Campbell
Minister to Students

DECEMBER 16

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.

1 Peter 3:15

Hope is like a diamond on a piece of black felt; it sparkles with its beauty. It's like a flower in the desert, conspicuous in its surroundings. It's like a candle in a deep cave, brighter than candles are supposed to be because of the absolute darkness. Unfortunately, we do not always appreciate the value of hope . . . unless we find ourselves in trying circumstances.

When sociologist Dale Archer interviewed dozens of people whose lives had been totally upended by Hurricane Katrina, he found two types of people: victims and survivors - people whose losses were not just devastating but crushing and people who also sustained incredible losses but had the strength to go on. The difference between the victims and the survivors had nothing to do with their losses or hardships. It had to do with hope. Survivors had hope for recovery and a better life whereas victims did not.

Hope is a powerful thing and most noticeable in times of trouble. How do some people who have had more than their share of trouble remain positive and happy? Hope does that. Peter recognizes the conspicuousness of hope especially in the midst of suffering - the persecution believers sometimes experience as a result of their faith. He encourages us to be hopeful and faithful despite our persecutions. He recognizes the inevitability that some will see the hope faithful believers have in the face of trouble and want to know how that can be - thus, his gentle admonition to be prepared to explain to anyone who asks why they have hope in such painful circumstances. Their hope is an opening to share Jesus with unbelievers. Peter says, "Don't miss this opportunity!"

Christmas provides an opportunity for us to share Jesus. Unfortunately, our culture has moved Jesus from center stage to offstage at Christmas. When we celebrate Jesus at Christmas, we are giving reasons for the hope we have. When we respond to devastating loss and grief with hope, we create opportunities to share that Jesus' victory over death and hell is why we are hopeful in the face of trouble. He is our Hope.

David Crocker

DECEMBER 17

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Isaiah 9:6 NIV

Like many of you, I have fond memories of Christmas past. One Christmas I remember getting a 3-speed bike complete with a “banana seat” and what was then called a “sissy bar.” Have you ever opened a gift and found another gift wrapped inside? What about this happening repeatedly where you have not just one or two presents but three or even four or more wrapped gifts? What if those gifts instead of getting smaller got bigger and better? I have realized this is how my walk with Jesus has been over the years. I learn and grow in Him and then as I “unwrap” something new about Him I realize that there’s more that I haven’t experienced before, and it just gets better. I realize that He is my Hope, my everything.

The gift of Jesus can be revealed by looking at the names He is called throughout scripture:

“Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” By examining His names, we can better understand His majesty, find ways to better worship Him, and explore ways to relate and abide in Him. Philippians 2:9 says, “Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name.” These verses lead us to focus on Jesus’ majesty and deity and prepare us to worship Him as such. Other scriptures lead us to a better functional understanding of Jesus such as in John 8:12 where Jesus explains that He is “The Light of the world.” His names lead us to focus on things such as “Bright and Morning Star.” What a way to start your day! He is Our Spiritual Rock, The Word, Image of God, Bread of Life, Head of the Church, Head of All Principality and Power, Author and Finisher of our Faith, and Our Hope.

Jesus once asked, “Who do you say I am?” What are some names you use in reflecting on Jesus? When Jesus thinks of you what names might He use? What is your identity with Christ? Do you have Hope in Jesus?

Mike Jones

DECEMBER 18

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Psalm 23:6 ESV

King David was no stranger to seemingly hopeless situations. As a young shepherd boy, he went up against lions and a giant. As the anointed future king of Israel, David found himself hiding from King Saul's attempts to kill him. In each of these moments, it would have been easy for David to feel hopeless and give up. Instead, we see in the Psalms that David constantly acknowledges that even in the darkest of moments he has hope in God.

My favorite thing about the Psalms is the honesty of the psalmists. We see them being raw and real about how they feel in their circumstances but never forgetting who God is. The 23rd Psalm is no different. In this familiar Psalm, David alludes to some of the hardships we face; chaos, confusion, loneliness, opposition. David acknowledges that God is the solution to each of these because He is the Good Shepherd. David ends this psalm with the reminder that we have eternal hope in God.

The Message translation for Psalm 23:6 is "Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life." The truth is no matter what life looks like today, God is pursuing us each day with His mercy and love. We have this hope every day and in the future because of who God is. He is the hope that we long for, and He offers it to us freely.

Meditate on Psalm 23 today. Even in this season that is meant to be filled with so much hope and light, it's possible that you are feeling much different than that. No matter where you find yourself today, hopeless or full of hope, take a moment to thank God for the hope you have in Him. He is our hope for today, tomorrow, and forever.

Katie Perkins

DECEMBER 19

And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.

1 Peter 5:10 ESV

Her brother was suffering from an illness that would bring him quickly to death. At the time, medicine did not have a way to save him from this end, and for days she waited for her brother to get better, to receive healing. She wept and fell before the Lord, but no relief came.

This woman is Mary, and her brother is Lazarus, the man resurrected at Jesus' command. Although their story ends in Jesus transcending death by raising Lazarus, it begins with Jesus waiting to take action. In John 11, we see Jesus stay put upon hearing about His friend's sickness, rather than instantly going to meet him in Bethany. We simultaneously witness Martha and Mary, angry about Jesus' waiting, confused, and making accusations.

After they suffer for a little while, the Lord meets the women in suffering, acknowledging their pain, and literally weeping with them over their brother. Then Jesus uses the pain of Lazarus' death to bring about a great miracle. Jesus calls Lazarus out of the grave; He removes the grave clothes that held him in death, bringing life and hope to all who witnessed. The miracle of Lazarus' resurrection wouldn't have been possible without Jesus' waiting, and the subsequent suffering of those who desired Lazarus' healing.

Maybe you feel like Mary and Martha this season, impatient and angry at this world and its real sufferings. But hear the good news - Lazarus' resurrection was not the end of Jesus' power over the grave. Jesus promises that He is the resurrection, and the life, He has defeated death and made us eternal beings. Our earthly lives, tainted by sufferings, are but a little while when compared to the endless perfection of heaven, which we've been called into by Jesus.

In our present sufferings, may we be reminded of the Lord's promise to restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish us in his perfect timing.

Lily Groves

DECEMBER 20

Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, "The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him."

Lamentations 3:21-24 NIV

Over the past few years, to intentionally grow in my faith, I've made it a personal practice to pick a spiritual topic and run with it for the entire year. I research scripture, read books, meditate, and have even gone on a related retreat in search for knowledge and wisdom. 2024's topic was ...but God...

Listed in God's word are many examples of "but God," where mankind was headed in one path and God intervened to set us on the right path or do what we cannot do. Isn't that what the whole Bible is about? Here are a few.

You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. Genesis 50:20 NIV

I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. I Corinthians 3:6 NIV

When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took Him down from the cross and laid Him in a tomb. But God raised Him from the dead, and for many days He was seen by those who traveled with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem. Acts 13:29-30 NIV

How has God intervened in your life? Has He changed the course of your days, your direction, or redeemed your poor choices? God sent His Son, is faithful, calls, shows loves, makes possible, reveals, demonstrates, remains, raised, makes known, remembers, protects, and abounds in love and faithfulness.

When you come to your senses, when you call to mind...have hope!

*God (who intervenes),
Thank You for butting into my life. Will You continue to do so the rest of my days? Will You change my direction to Yours in every choice that comes before me? Your will be done.*

And therefore, I can have hope!

Michelle Pardue

DECEMBER 21

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

Romans 15:13 NIV

God is the giver of hope, and he is the answer to hopelessness. In Greek, the meaning of hope is the expectation of what is sure. This means that God is the God of what we can be sure of and that He can be trusted. Paul prayed that the God of hope would fill us with joy and peace that would never cease. Paul also says that God is able to fill us with joy and peace as we trust in Him.

All God's promises, whether past, present, or future, are secured in His unchanging character and unchangeable Word, for He is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

We are safe in Jesus, and nothing can separate us from our God of Hope. Neither the ravages of old sin nature nor the temptations of the enemy who seeks our destruction can separate us from the love of God or remove the hope that is ours through Him.

Paul's prayer is that we all may overflow with blessed hope through the power of the Holy Spirit. Such a work of the Spirit takes place in the ongoing refining process of sanctification as we die to self, live for Christ, rejoice in the Lord, pray without ceasing, grow in grace, and mature in faith. We have the peace of God within and the hope that is ours in Christ because of all He is to us, all He has done for us, all He is doing for us as we journey through life, and all that He has promised to us.

When you read about hope in the Bible, it usually comes in threes. In Paul's prayer, we see that hope comes with joy and peace. God will not only give you hope; He will add to it joy and peace. Just like the wise men brought three gifts to Jesus, Jesus wants to give you three gifts this Christmas – HOPE, JOY, and PEACE.

Randy North

CHRIST THE SAVIOR IS BORN!

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world...And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger because there was no guest room available for them. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Luke 2:1-20

DECEMBER 22

LOVE

...Let us love one another, for love comes from God. This is how God showed his love ... He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

I John 4: 7-10 NIV

When we think about the Christmas season, our minds can become overwhelmed with thoughts of the many things that have to get done...Christmas parties, programs, shopping, cooking, wrapping presents, planning family get-togethers... Sometimes we forget to slow down and remember what it's all about.

One of my favorite Christmas shows is "A Charlie Brown Christmas" where Charlie Brown is trying to direct the Christmas program and everything seems to be in chaos. He decides to go find a Christmas tree and the only one he can find is a little, scraggly tree with its needles falling off. When he reaches his limit, he shouts out, "Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?" In that moment, Linus steps in and calmly says, "Sure, Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about." At this point, Linus recites, Luke 2: 8-14. As always, Linus is holding his blanket as he speaks. But then something changes. As he says, "Fear not," he drops his blanket. The blanket that he always carries. The blanket that brings him comfort, joy, security, and love.

With Jesus, we can let go of our fears and failures. We can give Him our hurts, hang-ups, sins, and sorrows. He offers us the most perfect gift of all, His love! His love was demonstrated for us at His birth and on the cross. His love provided a way back for us. God stepped out of heaven into our dark and chaotic world because He couldn't stand to live without us. Our sin separated us, and His perfect, sacrificial love saved us! He lived and died for us and offers us the most amazing gift of all, salvation! Will you accept this perfect gift this Christmas?

This Christmas, ask God to open your eyes to see His love demonstrated in the giving and receiving, and then ask Him to open your heart and reveal to you how He wants you to reach others with His love. Finally, thank Him for His incredible gift of love!

Kim Ponder
Minister of Children and Families

DECEMBER 23

DOORS OF HOPE

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.
Romans 12:12 NIV

Knock! Knock! I heard the hard sound and panicked! Before I could answer the door, the knob turned and she marched boldly in with a strange announcement, "Hello, I AM CANCER!" I tried to deny her tall presence and angrily told her to leave immediately. Staring at me, she sternly spoke, "Sit down. I have a word from your doctors. They say you have a MASS and it needs your utmost attention."

Tears of depression, despair, and death fell over my face as I sat down on the couch. She took my petite hands in her grand hands and calmly stated, "There is peace and purpose in this process." Out of the huge pink designer bag she was carrying, she dug down to retrieve a rose-pink Bible. "Okay, Christian lady," she quipped. "Let's go to Psalm 103:1-4 and read a message from your friend Jesus Christ:

Bless the Lord, O my soul,
And all that is within me,
Bless His holy name!
Bless the Lord, O my soul,
And forget not all his benefits,
Who forgives all your iniquities,
Who heals all your diseases,
Who redeems your life from destruction,
Who crowns you with loving kindness and tender mercies.

We repeated the verses until I cried myself to sleep. When I awoke, she showed me a new set of clothes for my "mourning" madness. "Take a shower, and put on this pink designer dress. Trust me, we are about to walk through some healing doors. Put on these pink cushion designer sandals because we will travel for many days." "How long!" I cried. "In God's time," she replied. Don't throw away your HOPE. Take my hand and trust me to take you through new doors. There are individuals ready to assist." Tired and perplexed, I finally let her guide and lead.

Door One: I walked in and saw a friend. CANCER...just strolled in and sat on a friend's pink couch. "Follow her," she instructed. I could not speak! The friend took me to my doctor's appointment and took notes for me as I listened to my treatment plan.

Door Two: I could not speak! Friends were circling me in prayer in a surgery lounge and one later took me to a chemo room where I saw a friend sitting in a chair next to MY chemo chair. Not saying a word, this friend continued reading her novel.

Door Three: A friend had a mop and bucket in hand. "I am going by your house to make it clean and comfortable." I could not speak! Her rolling cart had scents of lime, Lysol, and lavender.

Door Four: I was escorted into a living room that had a giant evergreen decorated with pink ornaments. Underneath it were colorful packages and bags. Some of the gifts inside included towels, scarves, clothing, jewelry, and money. Covering the entire dining room table were encouraging notes and cards from family and friends throughout the United States. I could not speak!

Door Five: A make-up artist told me to sit in a pink chair. She uniquely painted my face and draped me in pink and maroon for a photo shoot. I could not speak!

Door Six: My strength was returning! I was led outside to a spacious park. I almost fainted when I saw crowds of men, women, and children dressed athletically in shades of pink: Fuchsia, Fandango, Magenta, Mulberry, and Barbie. "Come walk in this race with us to meet CANCER," they pleaded. I had totally forgotten about that tall lady CANCER! I could not speak!

Door Seven: The crowd walked with me back to my house. CANCER was sitting on MY couch with her pink slippers propped up on MY coffee table. Finally, I **could** speak! "I wish to be alone," I said. "Are you asking me to leave?" She laughed. "Yes," I replied with a sigh. CANCER stood up. She looked shorter. On my head she placed a sparkly silvery tiara and around my neck a feathery pink wrap. "You are a survivor!" she exclaimed. "You don't need me anymore; however, the world needs YOU to share OUR testimony!" CANCER took off her pink wig and threw it at my feet. We both laughed at her bald head. Her goodbye wave was like that of a contestant in a beauty pageant...

Thank God! I have not seen the character CANCER in 14 years!

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank You for exceedingly abundantly blessing me and giving me hope during my cancer journey. You revived my imagination and renewed my faith!

Donna Hardy

Silent Night

Words by
Joseph Mohr
Translation by
John Freeman Young

Music by
Franz Xaver Gruber

VERSE



1. Si lent night, ho - ly night; All is calm, all is bright. Round yon vir - gin
2. Si lent night, ho - ly night; Shep - herds quake at the sight. Glo - ries stream from
3. Si lent night, ho - ly night; Son of God, love's pure light. Ra - dant beams from
4. Si lent night, ho - ly night; Won - drous star, lend thy light. With the an - gels



moth - er and Child. Ho - ly In - fant so ten - der and mild; Sleep in heav - en - ly
heav - en a - far, heav'n - ly hosts sing al - le - lu - ia; Christ, the Sav - ior, is
Thy ho - ly face, with the dawn of re - deem - ing grace; Je - sus, Lord, at Thy
let us sing, al - le - lu - ia to our King; Christ, the Sav - ior, is



peace, sleep in heav - en - ly peace. _____
born! Christ, the Sav - ior, is born! _____
birth, Je - sus, Lord, at Thy birth. _____
born! Christ, the Sav - ior, is born! _____

CCLI Song # 27862

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DECEMBER 24

*She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus,
because he will save his people from their sins.*

Matthew 1:21 NIV

Turning Point

A depressed girl, she searches for meaning,
A hard childhood leads her down a rough road.
A fast lifestyle of bad decisions and drugs,
A hardened heart that nothing could melt.

A bad reputation that continues to hurt,
A fix to her life is now doubtful.
A heavy burden is what she now bears,
A cry for help is her desperate plea.

Will she find her answer in time?
Will her life be better or worse?
Will she give up or can she cope?
Will she discover the miracle of hope?

He was born from Mary in the manger,
He is the great teacher and our savior.
He talks about forgiveness and love,
He tells about blessing from above.

He will give you needed protection,
He will save your soul from extinction.
He will give you sought after relief,
He asks you to turn away from sin and believe.

His sacrifice is all you need,
His love gives you heavenly peace.
His story transcends time and space,
His Father will give you divine grace.

Many are like the depressed girl,
Many are so addicted to their lifestyle.
She did break the cycle she was in,
She now follows a better road and then,

She turned her life around and more,
She found the answer she had hoped for.
She is not unique in her sorrow,
She found God... will you follow?

She turned away from sin's dark night,
She now has faith and true joy in life.
Everything is now calm and bright,
Everything is good on this silent night.



*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son,
that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.
For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world,
but to save the world through him.*

John 3:16-17

DECEMBER 25

As for me, I will always have hope, I will praise you more and more.
Psalm 71:14 NIV

Life offers many challenges for the believer. Our hopes, dreams, and prayers seem to be far from reality. The Bible assures us that there is light in darkness and that darkness can't overcome it; there is hope in times of despair, and those who hope will renew their strength. We, as believers in Christ, are most fortunate. Our lives do have meaning! We always have hope!

What is our response to such blessing? The psalmist says it is to praise God more and more, to tell of God's righteous and marvelous deeds, His mighty saving acts, not only to our family and friends but to all who do not know God nor his Son, our Savior. In spite of discouragement, failure, opposition, and loss, God's loving presence has sustained me. I will always have hope for He is God and has loved, blessed, and guided me all my life long.

How does Jesus give us hope? He is with us when our hearts are troubled; He is with us when our burdens are heavy and we are bent down with care, and He tells us to take his yoke, for His burden is light; He is with us when we have lost our way, and He guides us to the right path and then walks with us. He tells us that He has come to give us life, abundant and eternal. He assures us that He didn't come to condemn us, but that through his loving sacrifice we might be saved! This is our wonderful Savior who helps us live with hope.

Christmas is a time to have hope and praise God for bringing hope into the world with all its power and beauty - a baby, born in a manger! That night the shepherds marveled at the message of hope, the angels sang of the hope of peace among all humanity. It was a night filled with hope that is still with us and before us! Praise the Lord for his gift of Hope!

Lord Jesus, thank You that I can say with others, "As for me, I will always have hope." Help me to live a life of praise and thank-ful-ness for this precious gift. Amen.

Joyce Wyatt

DECEMBER 26

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:38-39 NIV

As a primary school counselor, I taught a unit on wise decision-making each year. After learning about conscience, we had a lesson on the fact that the brain and the conscience are always with us, no matter where we are or what we are doing. Even though grown-ups aren't always with us to tell us what to do, we can use our brains and consciences to help us decide wisely.

Once I asked the kindergartners, "When you go high above the clouds in an airplane, what goes with you?" I wanted the children to say, "My conscience and my brain." However, a tiny little girl wearing blue glasses answered, "Jesus." I said, "Yes, and what else goes with you?" The children said, "Your conscience and your brain." Continuing, I said, "If you dive way down in the deepest ocean, what goes with you?" Again the child said softly, "Jesus." My heart was melting because this little white-haired angel was living in a foster home, one of several she had been in. What a comfort for her to know that Jesus is ALWAYS with her, wherever she may be!

Romans 8:38-39 is a message of hope! In the whole world, God is there. In all emotional states and any time of day or night, God is there. Just as we can't run away from our consciences and brains, we can't run away from God. Paul lists nine things that can never separate us from the love of God, and then throws in "nor anything else in all creation" for good measure!

God is love and hope. Where God is, His love is...in hospital rooms, prison cells, homeless shelters, drug treatment facilities, unemployment agencies. What a wonderful assurance!

Father, I thank You for the hope and peace that only You can give and ask for a renewed sense of Your love and Your presence. We pray that we'll get ourselves out of the way and allow You to use us to spread Your love to others.

Mimi Webster

DECEMBER 27

*By day the Lord directs His love, at night his song is with me
- a prayer to the God of my life.*

Psalm 42:8 NIV

Music has always been an integral part of my life. I remember the last day of first grade - walking home and seeing a brand-new piano in our living room. When I asked my father why we had a new piano, he responded, "Did I forget to tell you, you are starting piano lessons on Monday?" - lessons that would open doors for my heart and my mind. Learning songs began to speak to me and at times heal me. I would go from playing notes on the keys to making melodies as I practiced.

This scripture says, "By day the Lord directs with His love, at night His song is with me." Honestly, how often have you been sitting in a pew on Sunday morning simply because it's part of your Sunday routine? Your week was hard, obstacles came at you from every angle. You stand to sing that familiar hymn or a song you had never heard before - lyrics that become a balm for your heavy soul. These words are now part of the song that is within you. The ache that nothing could touch has been lessened. You find in this moment the truth, "His song is within me."

One of my great joys is singing along to the radio with my granddaughter Eliza. She loves Christian music. What I love are the conversations that follow a song she particularly likes. The questions center around what made the person write those lyrics about Jesus. She asks, "Did they want people to know Jesus loves them no matter what?" We talk about how these words speak to us. To see her praising Jesus through a song warms my heart more than I can say.

Yes, the Lord directs me with His love, and His songs are constantly surrounding us, allowing us to utter a prayer to the God of our hearts and souls. I am thankful that He knows our hearts, He blessed us with song, and He allows us to carry this truth with us for eternity.

"Music with all its subtlety has immense His power to unite people, spread love, and bring peace to the world." - Pandey

Sharon Hogan

DECEMBER 28

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me.*

Psalm 23:4 KJV

While preparing to conduct a funeral, I read the 23rd Psalm which the family had requested to be read as part of the service. As I read verse 4, I saw something I had never thought about before - "Yea, though I walk through." We **will** walk through valleys in our lifetime. But when we do, we can be assured that God is with us. What I saw for the first time was that I needed to "walk through." God was telling me that I had to do my part. I had to keep walking and not stop because of the valley I was facing. It is tempting to just turn it over to God expecting Him to fix it. God can fix it, but he wants us to do our part.

There was a small town in Alabama with five wooden buildings: a general store, a gas station, a post office, a hotel, and a Baptist Church. When a new highway was built and bypassed this town, the motel went out of business due to the lack of traffic. Businessmen in Montgomery bought the hotel and turned it into a brothel. The people in the church prayed that it would close, especially since it was next door to their church.

One night the brothel burned to the ground. At the next church meeting, members praised God for what had happened. They wondered if they would ever know what started the fire. An elderly woman stood up and said, "Sometimes we have to put feet to our prayers."

This is where hope comes in. For us, the power of hope comes from the Holy Spirit and empowers us to walk through the valleys we face. The Spirit will help us find a way through the valley if we keep walking. Even though it may not be the outcome we desire, the spirit will help us to keep walking. (I do not recommend arson as a way to keep walking!)

As you celebrate this Advent Season, my hope for you is that you will feel the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit as you "walk through."

Terry Baker

The Renewing Power of Hope

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.

2 Corinthians 4:16 NIV

We made it to Christmas and the Hope of Advent... Immanuel is here! He always is. Perhaps you have found, in this season of spending time with the Lord, the deep value of being renewed daily by God's Word and presence. Lamentations 3:22-23 says, "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." When we make space for God in our lives, he is faithful to renew and prepare us for all we will face. What incredible hope!

Because of the darkness of this present world, and because our humanity separated us from God, we can sometimes go through days as hopeless people, realizing we are each wasting away. 2 Corinthians 4:16 reminds us however, that we do not lose heart because God's Hope is renewing us, and His Holy Spirit's presence is always within and around us... preparing us for a new day, a new heaven and earth, for all eternity.

How can we know this hope and let it renew our lives?

1) Trust that God will reveal his love to you when you meet with him daily. Jesus said to the Lord, "*I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.*" John 17:26 NIV

2) Engage in worship. Scripture reminds us that we were created to worship God, to enjoy his mercies... and to do it daily! Whether in personal times of devotion or while engaging with others in the worship of God, those times significantly renew our spirits and give us purpose and direction.

3) Spend time in God's Word, allowing it to change us and lead us to obedience and hope. Being shaped and transformed by scripture brings us renewal in our relationship with God.

Where have you found hope in your walk of renewal? How greatly do you need God's mercies and hope in your life?

Lord, may your deep and abiding hope transform me through regular encounters with you. You really love me. Help me enjoy the beauty of a crisp starlit night, gaze on a painting that reflects your creativity, praise you alongside my faith community, enjoy the strong beauty of creation around me, read a Psalm and live thankfully to you who gives me hope every day. Hope is here... you are all around me. Thank you, Jesus. Amen.

Mark Groves
Associate Pastor for Worship and the Arts

Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.
He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.
Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;
but those who hope in the Lord
will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.
Isaiah 40:28-31

AUTHORS

Introduction
Frank Crichton

Artist Statement
Lisa Stockton

Christmas Traditions
Larry Fields

Missions
Tim Earl

Welcome House
Cindy Hood

Prologue
Mark Moreland

December 1
Kelly Rose

December 2
Angie Johnson

December 3
Ed Thrift

December 4
Melanie Kirkham

December 5
Ben Geisel

December 6
Amy Tucker

December 7
Debbie Smith

December 8
Amy Brock

December 9
Nancy Reeves

December 10
Eliza Thackston

December 11
Marty Smith

December 12
Adney Cross

December 13
Susan Fendley

December 14
Allison Lamm

December 15
Nick Campbell

December 16
David Crocker

December 17
Mike Jones

December 18
Katie Perkins

December 19
Lily Groves

December 20
Michelle Pardue

December 21
Randy North

December 22
Kim Ponder

December 23
Donna Hardy

December 24
Tim Masten

December 25
Joyce Wyatt

December 26
Mimi Webster

December 27
Sharon Hogan

December 28
Terry Baker

**The Renewing
Power of Hope**
Mark Groves

ARTISTS

Cover – Lisa Stockton

Joy – Erin Ogle

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We would like to express our appreciation to each person who has contributed to this Advent Devotional through their art, their writing, their creative and production assistance, their encouragement, and their prayers.

To the congregation of Central Bearden, our families, and our friends who read this devotional, we wish you a very Merry Christmas. We pray that during this season and in the coming year you will be blessed by God's presence, confident in the hope of His Birth and Resurrection, filled with His exceedingly great joy, and that your heart will overflow with His perfect peace. Do as the shepherds of Bethlehem did that night long ago. Bow before Him, Behold Him, Believe Him, Worship Him, Glorify Him, and go tell someone else about Him.

Hallelujah! Christ the Savior Is Born!

THE CHRISMON TREE

Central's Chrismon Tree began in 1977 when the women of the church made the first ornaments for our church tree. The number of Christian Christmas symbols on our tree has grown each year until we now have over one hundred.

Our Chrismons are made in white, the liturgical color of Christmas, which refers to Christ's purity and perfection, and gold, which refers to His majesty and glory. Tiny white lights on the tree point to Christ as the Light of the world. These are placed on the evergreen that symbolizes the eternal life Christ has won for us.

Our tree is decorated early in December and placed at the front of the sanctuary. It is a symbol, or outward sign, of what Christmas really is.

The word Chrismon (*Kris-mon*) comes from "Christ 'plus' monogram," meaning a monogram of our Lord. The first Christians used Chrismons, like the fish, to recognize each other and to avoid their enemies. Christian symbols have been found on ancient jewelry kitchen utensils, doors of buildings, in catacombs, and in early Christian cemeteries. Their use reached its height in the Middle Ages.

ADVENT AT CENTRAL BEARDEN

2024 Calendar of Events & Christmas Giving Opportunities

First Sunday of Advent | December 1 | 10:30am

Second Sunday of Advent | December 8 | **Children Sing in Worship**

Third Sunday of Advent | December 15 | 10:30am

December 15 | 7 pm |

Hope Has Come: Christmas with Central Bearden Concert

A concert for all ages with Choir, Orchestra, Worship Team & Band, Central Ringers, Children's Choir, and more. Experience "Christmas with Central Bearden" and the beauty, joy, and hope of Christmas as we worship together.

Christmas Eve Worship | 5 pm

Sunday, December 29 Worship: "Sleepers, Wake!" presented by The Word Players, 10:30 am (No Sunday Bible Study)



World Missions Offering | Now- December 31

Giving to the World. Mission Offering allows you to support:

- Cooperative Baptist fellowship: Offering for Global Missions
- International Mission Board: Lottie Moon Christmas Offering
- Baptist World Alliance: Aid to Hunger Around the World

Following Jesus | Meeting Needs

During November and December our church family contributed, or is contributing, children's shoes and socks to Mission of Hope to serve those in rural Appalachia with basic needs and Christmas gifts. We filled hundreds of boxes for Operation Christmas Child and serve as a regional drop off center. We filled multiple "Holiday Hope Bags" and shared with our neighbors through Samaritan Ministry. Thank you, Central Bearden, for meeting needs and sharing God's love in tangible ways.