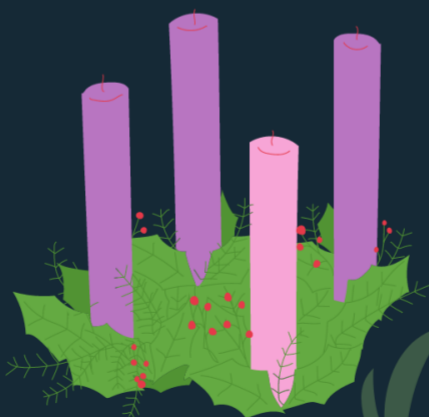




WESLEY FREEDOM
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

ADVENT DEVOTIONAL 2020



Saturday, November 28

Welcome to the 2020 Wesley Freedom Advent Devotional! This is the inaugural edition of something we hope will continue for years to come. As you will see, in this devotional guide we feature reflections from many members and friends of Wesley Freedom UMC from across all services, ages, and ministry areas.

The Gospel of John tells us that in Jesus, “The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood” (The Message). These devotionals are our way of taking the word of God and bringing it into your closest neighborhood – your home! It is our hope, especially in a year of physical separation, that in reading scripture together and hearing the voices of our congregation, we will be drawn closer together as we approach Christmas.

If you have an Advent wreath, each day of Advent light the candles for that week and take a few minutes to read and pray with us. The wreath is one of the most powerful traditions of Advent. The round wreath symbolizes the endless love of God which encircles us. The four candles on the wreath symbolize the hope, peace, joy, and love which Christ shines into our lives. A single candle representing Jesus, the Light of the world, is placed on the inside of the wreath. We invite you to bring the tradition of the advent wreath into your home.

Ideas for how to make your own Advent wreath can be found at www.wesleyfreedom.org. As you journey through this devotion, we will light a new candle each Sunday. That candle, and those lit the weeks before, can be lit every day of that week as you share your devotion. On Christmas Eve we will light the center Christ candle together as we celebrate the birth of Christ. We that pray these devotions and the lighting of the Advent wreath will offer space for Jesus to be welcomed and worshiped in your home and lives.

WEEK 1



Sunday, November 29

Luke 1:26-38

REFLECTION

Today we begin together the season of Advent. In this season of waiting and expectation, we think we know what's coming. These four weeks of prayer will lead us into the celebration of our Savior's birth. As you read today's scripture, remember that Mary had no idea what was coming. When the angel showed up in her room, she did not know this holy encounter would lead to an unexpected pregnancy, a stable birth in Bethlehem, and a lifelong journey with Jesus. Mary, whose very name captured the bitterness and suffering known by the Jewish people of her time, was asked to invite Jesus to inhabit her womb and redefine her life and family. The incarnation of our Savior begins when Mary says, "May your word to me be fulfilled."

This Advent we will not be able to do Christmas as usual; we can't just live our ordinary lives. We, like Mary and her people, are living in a year where there is much bitterness and suffering. Into this darkness, the light of Jesus can shine all the brighter. Light the candle of hope on your Advent wreath and invite the Holy Spirit to fill your home, transform your family, and give your life new purpose.

PRAYER FOR LIGHTING THE FIRST ADVENT CANDLE

Jesus you are the light of the world, we light this first advent candle and invite you to be the light of our lives. You know the darkness of worry, sickness, brokenness, sin, and despair that can creep into this home. Come Lord Jesus, we welcome you, we need you; overcome the present darkness with the brilliance of your presence. Ignite hope in us that we can move from fear to faithfulness. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Jennifer Smith is the Senior Pastor of Wesley Freedom UMC

Monday, November 30

Psalm 146

REFLECTION

It would be easy to assume that Psalm 146 is just a praise song, a sung prayer to God. After all, it begins with the words “Praise the Lord!” Reading it again and again, however, I get the sense that there is a lot more to this short Psalm than just what’s on the surface. Psalms 146 – 150 (the last five Psalms in the book) all begin and end with the same words, “Praise the Lord!” This translated phrase, in the original Hebrew, is transliterated as ‘Hallelujah!’ In the Hebrew scriptures, that same word is used only in the Psalms. Psalm 146, however, is slightly different than the other four. Later in this Psalm, the simple exclamation is modified to become, “*I will* praise the Lord.” To me this implies that the author is expressing a personal conviction in the words of this Psalm. After the call to praise the Lord and the author’s vow to sing praises to God “as long as I live,” it addresses the impermanence of mortal human beings (verses 3-4), urging the listeners to not put their trust in them. It quickly contrasts this with verses 5-9, which name God as the true hope, setting out reasons for this assurance: God created the heaven and the earth and all that is in them, he is trustworthy, caring and compassionate, just, merciful, and loving.

This gives me a sense of hope, as well as a challenge to remain true and to do likewise. I may find myself: oppressed, hungry, a prisoner, blind, bowed down, a stranger, an orphan, or a widow(er). However, this Psalm gives me the hope that with God all is not totally hopeless. God will see me through, and as verse 10 says, God is everlasting.

PRAYER

Creator God, author of my salvation, I thank you for your steadfastness, your example in Jesus Christ, my Lord, and the urging of the Holy Spirit to do as Jesus would have me do to feed the hungry, quench the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, tend the sick, and comfort the prisoner. Amen.

Kevin Silberzahn is the Lay Leader of Wesley Freedom UMC

Tuesday, December 1

Isaiah 9:2-7

REFLECTION

Many years ago, deep divisions existed between my father and me. We were in our own world of darkness. When my husband and I had children, we found a light shining in this darkness. Dad and I found a thread, a love for my tiny little humans, around which we were able to frame our discussions. We now had the words we needed to build common ground and find the deep and abiding love that we had for each other. While we never agreed on everything, we were always able to have open and respectful conversations about our differences. I treasure the memories of our open and honest discussions at his kitchen table where we discussed everything from nuclear proliferation to Dr. Kevorkian.

Today we find ourselves in a world full of darkness, divisiveness, fear and anger. Arguments over LGBTQ Rights, Black Lives Matter, Health Care, and the Pandemic are everywhere we turn. The fear and anger are palpable. Deep divisions are forming across our nation, our communities, and even our church. Into this hot mess, God speaks to us in the deepest of dark places, reaching out to us with the most innocent of tokens – a baby. A baby full of that “new baby smell.” Innocent in all of the problems of the world, the baby enters into a world filled with darkness and brings the promise of justice and righteousness. A baby that will bring endless peace.

With our love for this baby that God brings us, we are able to frame our discussions about these deep and divisive issues. We will never agree on everything. But, with the love God has for us, we will always be able to speak to each other with love and respect as we seek to find the common ground on which we can move forward to bring his light to the rest of the world.

PRAYER

Dear Lord, help us to remember that we are ALL your children. Help us to remember that you love us all and to use that love to help us come together so that we can take your light out into the world. Amen.

Bettina Wesloh is a member of Wesley Freedom UMC

Wednesday, December 2

Isaiah 11:1-9

REFLECTION

I don't think we can ever overestimate the power of a word. Sometimes we try to contrast words with deeds, but the truth is that most of our actions flow from words – spoken aloud, or only to ourselves. We make sense of the world through translating experience into an internal narrative. We even make sense of who we are by the words we choose to describe ourselves and our context. God created the world through the Word, and we create our understanding of our worlds through our words.

In today's passage from Isaiah, we see the transformative power of the words of the Messiah. Isaiah tells us that when the Messiah reigns, his word would become his rod – an instrument of kingly power. Isaiah assures us that this promised King would not judge based on the words that he is told by others – those stories we tell ourselves about why we do the things we do and how we think the world is – but rather with the righteousness of God! In his kingly decrees, without raising a sword or an army, the wicked would be destroyed with just a word. And yet, the destruction of the wicked is not a violent act, but a transformative one. Isaiah tells us that when the Messiah reigns, violence will cease – the wolf shall live with the lamb, the lion will eat straw, the infant will play with venomous snakes. Through the Messiah's words, the wicked will die to their wickedness and become peaceful. Evil will be judged; the earth will be set right.

We know that this Messiah is Christ our Lord. This Advent let us be transformed by his Word. Let his word make us die to our wickedness so that we might live in peace.

PRAYER

Lord, search us and know us. Judge us not according to our justifications, but according to your true justice. With the same Word you spoke at creation, re-create us that we might be slain in respect to our wickedness, and become fit to live in your kingdom. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Rev. Ian Collier is the Associate Pastor of Wesley Freedom UMC

Thursday, December 3

John 19:1-22

REFLECTION

“Don’t let me stop your great self-destruction. Die if you want to, you misguided martyr. I wash my hands of your demolition. Die, if you want to, you innocent puppet!” These are Pilate’s final words to Jesus in the musical, *Jesus Christ Superstar* (Lyrics by Tim Rice & music by Andrew Lloyd Webber). In my freshman year of college, I was cast as Pontius Pilate in this musical. My mother was not pleased. She felt the play was sacrilegious. The play depicts Jesus as a wonderful man, but nothing more than a man.

Being in college, and thinking I was “my own man” at the time, I accepted the role over my mother’s objections. I knew that Jesus was who the Bible said he was – the son of the living God – not what Andrew Lloyd Webber said. I thought I could separate my beliefs from my job as an “actor.” But I was haunted (some would say convicted!) every time I had to sing those words which I knew were not true.

Jesus is far from being a puppet, or merely a nice story to remember at Christmas time. Jesus is the King of all creation, and the sacrifice he endured for our sins is something I never want to marginalize again. As Isaiah the prophet predicted, “He was despised and rejected – a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief...but he was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed. All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God’s paths to follow our own. Yet the LORD laid on him the sins of us all.” *Isaiah 53: 3-6, NLT*

PRAYER

Jesus, thank you for your Word, which reminds me of the life you willingly, knowingly, painfully lay down for our salvation. May your name be praised forevermore! Amen.

Ben White is a Small Group leader at Wesley Freedom UMC

Friday, December 4
Revelation 19:11-21

REFLECTION

As I write this devotion, Halloween décor riddles my neighborhood. Styrofoam headstones with “RIP” rise out of yards. This got me pondering the acronym. Are my deceased relatives resting in peace? Are my mother and father resting in peace? My brain jumps to *living* in peace. Am I living in peace? My childhood household lived in the chaos of my brother. Rob, was an abuser and an addict. No matter what my parents tried, Rob seemed to come out on the other side angrier and worse. To cope with the chaos, my Dad was a hoarder, buried under the “stuff” of life. Our house was far from peaceful. All three, my mother, my father and my brother are gone now. I miss them terribly and I pray that they are resting in peace as they did not live peaceful lives. Growing up in the unrest, my parents were docile people desperately grasping for peace.

As I grew into an adult, it took time to shake the chains of childhood. In eleventh grade, I began involvement in my church youth ministry program. My eyes were opened to the peace and refuge of Christ. My youth minister and the teens I met accepted the extremely flawed, wounded me. They helped me see a road to finding peace. What a gift that gave me strength!

Today’s passage reminds me that Christ will come again, and I am to bind myself to Christ and his power. It teaches me that words matter, and it impresses upon me to use my words so that others may see Christ working through me and living in me. The sharp sword that extends from Christ’s mouth cuts through all the lies I am bombarded with daily. It helps me to prioritize life and focus on God and not all the other “stuff” that buries me from living a Godly life.

PRAYER

Lord, I want to feel your heart, and see the world through your eyes, I want to be your hands and feet, I want to live a life that leads. Let us shine the light of Jesus in the darkest night. Amen. (From *Until the Whole World Hears* by Casting Crowns).

Jen Shatto is a Small Group leader at Wesley Freedom UMC

Saturday, December 5

THE FIRST SABBATH OF ADVENT

“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” (Exodus 20:8-11)

PRAYER

Lord, help me make your Sabbath holy. Through your Holy Spirit, compel me to take the rest I need, and restrain me from withholding rest from others. Amen.

WEEK 2



Sunday, December 6

Matthew 1:18-25

REFLECTION

Jesus' name makes sense. God became incarnate so we can be saved from the power of sin, and 'Jesus' means "Yah (the LORD) saves." But did you know that Jesus Christ isn't the only "Jesus" in the Bible? In one of the quirks of language and translation, since the Old Testament is usually translated into English from Hebrew, and the New Testament from Greek, the name "Jesus" only appears in the New Testament, but Christ's namesake has a whole book of scripture bearing his name. You see, "Jesus" comes from the Greek, Ἰησοῦς (*iêsous*), which is how the Greek language rendered the Hebrew name *Yeshua*, "Joshua." Yes, Joshua – the son of Nun and commander of the Hebrews during the conquest of Canaan – seems to be the biblical referent for the naming of Jesus. I have to think that this connection is important. Out of all of the possible names, God chose a name that already had a story behind it.

We know that Jesus is Emmanuel – God with us – and that Jesus is God with us *to save us*. But what is this saving that Jesus – Joshua – would do? In the Old Testament narrative, Joshua, son of Nun, led the people into the promised land. Joshua was obedient to God to drive out the idolaters and establish a just tribal union.

Jesus – 'Yah Saves' – is the second and better Joshua. But our promised land is not some earthly location – it's our relationship with God. As Sin drove us out of our home, Christ ushers us back in. The Kingdom of Heaven begins in our hearts, and as we find ourselves at home, we realize that not even death can drive us out anymore. Christ drives out the sin within our hearts and reigns over us as a just and righteous king. In Jesus, God brings humanity to himself – to our eternal promised land.

PRAYER FOR LIGHTING THE SECOND ADVENT CANDLE

Christ, save us from our sins and establish your reign in our hearts. Give us your peace, inside and out, and bring us to God's promised kingdom. Amen.

Rev. Ian Collier is Associate Pastor at Wesley Freedom UMC

Monday, December 7
Ephesians 2:1-10

REFLECTION

In the first part of the passage, Paul is explaining how we are spiritually and morally dead because of our sins. We have a broken relationship with the source of life, which is God. Paul continues that we need God's grace to be saved from that sin. When I think about God's grace, it humbles me. It means to me that his love towards us is forgiving and he shows us his kindness and unmerited favor. In verse 8, Paul talks about how God's grace is a gift. No one can take credit for their own salvation and no one can attempt to earn their salvation.

I, myself, am not very good at sharing my faith in person, especially to those with whom I don't have a good relationship already, so I feel this passage is a good reminder that our actions are a way to share and show our faith to others indirectly. Verse 10 summarizes this passage well by explaining that we are God's workers and were purposefully created to do His work and spread His word to all.

We cannot have faith and sit idly by when we see hurt around our community. We have a responsibility as disciples of Christ to practice our faith in ways that others might see the gift of God's grace through us. I have hope from this passage because I see the people of our Church not only have faith during these difficult times, but still doing "good works" around our community for those in need.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank you for gift of grace so that we may have a relationship with you and be a messenger of your forgiving love. Please continue to guide us so that we may do your work in our community. Amen.

Jarod Spessard is a Small Group leader at Wesley Freedom UMC

Tuesday, December 8

Romans 6:1-14

REFLECTION

When I was in high school, it seemed that the kids who got in trouble and made bad decisions received the most attention from the Vice Principal. Often, I witnessed positive attention as they walked the halls together and hung out in the office just talking. I questioned the fairness of this at the time. I did not understand the grace they were receiving while I barely had any interaction with the front office, much less the Vice Principal (who I thought was a cool guy). I questioned: more sin, more grace? Were they making poor choices to get more attention and grace from the Vice Principal? Or was the Vice Principal guiding them to a less destructive path that will lead to a more productive and rewarding life?

I hadn't thought about that time in High School until I was reading Romans chapter 6 that begins, "What shall we say then? Are we to remain in sin so that grace may increase?" In the letter to the Romans, Paul felt compelled to explain that this was not the intended interpretation. We are not here to sin as much as we want to receive grace and keep God 'busy'.

Paul's letters are hopeful and comforting as he explains our 'immersion' in Christ's life – from the cross to the resurrection. Our water-and-Spirit Baptism is the sacrament and symbol for this immersion. We are in union with Jesus and join Christ in his suffering and death – literally death to our sin! We also rise again in union with Christ in a new life. No longer slaves to sin, we are free to live with the Holy Spirit as our constant internal minister so we can lead a Christ-filled life in a fallen world. Not only are we saved by Christ's death and resurrection, but we are free from the chains of sin in order to live a righteous and holy life through our baptismal union with Christ.

PRAYER

Dear Lord, help me to continue a Christ-filled life free from sin. Help me to be mindful of my Baptism and the Holy Spirit within me to guide me. Amen.

Cindy Shruell is the Front Office Assistant at Wesley Freedom UMC

Wednesday, December 9

1 John 1:1-2:2

REFLECTION

Have you ever been hungry but did not know what you wanted? You may eat different things, but they do not fill the hunger within you. No matter what you eat, you are still hungry. We all have that hunger within us. But it is not physical hunger; it is spiritual hunger. We have the hunger for meaning in life; for peace; for joy; for a sense of loving and being loved. All people have this hunger and try to fill it with many different things. What are you using to fill this void?

John tells us that Jesus fills this emptiness. He is the answer for which we are looking. The void we are really trying to fill is the separation we have from God. We lose fellowship with God and we are hungry. Sin is what causes us to lose that fellowship with God. So, John's answer is not to sin.

But we (all people) choose to sin and our fellowship is broken. But Jesus is the answer when we do choose to sin. God will make our lives whole – complete – by removing that separation. Through Jesus, we have forgiveness and cleansing if we confess our sins and repent. Don't think this restoration comes without a cost, though. God's grace does not come cheaply; it comes because of Jesus' death on the cross. His death on the cross paid the debt of our sins.

Salvation through Jesus gives our life meaning, joy, peace, love and everything else we need to end this hunger. Jesus tell us: I am light in the darkness; I am peace in all troubles; I am hope for the hopeless; I am joy to all those sad; I am health in all sickness; I am love to the loveless; I am Jesus, the Son of God.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, I thank you for your love and mercy. Thank you for a full, meaningful life. I know we have fallen short of what you intend me to be. I confess my sins to you: _____, (You fill in the blanks) and ask for your forgiveness and cleansing.

Roger Bridges is a Small Group leader at Wesley Freedom UMC

Thursday, December 10

1 Peter 2:21-25

REFLECTION

As we await the birth of God's only begotten son, Jesus, our minds are focused on the greatest gift of God. Thus, as I read 1 Peter 2:21-25, my eyes immediately jumped to, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness." Another great gift – Christ took away our sins and assured us of eternal life with God our Father. We were saved by grace even though we were sinners. Grace was a gift from God.

As children, we were told that Santa Claus was coming and that he knew if we had been naughty or nice. If we wanted him to bring us a gift, the price was that we had to be good. God didn't put conditions on his gift – it was given to us as unconditional love. But by accepting this gift, I felt compelled to do good works. My mother made this easy for me as she knew that if I was not kept busy there was a good chance that I would get in trouble. If I appeared to be getting bored or had nothing to do, she would say, "Why don't you go and see if Miss Bailey needs help with anything." Miss Bailey was an elderly woman who had never married. She stayed at home and cared for her parents until they died and then spent the rest of her life in the house. When she was able to find work, it was as a caregiver in someone's home for little pay. There was always an unending list of chores to be done – boxes to be moved, trash to be taken out, etc. I never minded helping as I knew she could not physically do the things. She was always very thankful for my help and we would share some lemonade when I was finished. Being able to help people in need of help has always been my favorite gift – much more enjoyable than a gift under the Christmas tree.

PRAYER

Gracious God, I thank you for the many blessings you give me throughout my life. I especially thank you for your son Jesus Christ and the promise of everlasting life with you. I thank you for the opportunity to be with others and help them in their times of need. Please continue to bless me with good health that I may serve others as You have served/loved me. Amen.

Don Champ is an Usher and a member of the Generosity Team at Wesley Freedom UMC

Friday, December 11

Romans 7:18-8:17

REFLECTION

To me, salvation means leaving behind our worldly tendencies and allowing Christ to have full control over our lives and our hearts, and that is exactly what this passage is about. This excerpt from Romans explains how our flesh is corrupted by the evil in the world, but our intentions can be made good and our inward desires can turn to follow Jesus. However, the world often takes over these faithful intentions and we succumb to evil. We do not have the “will-power” to overcome this evil on our own, but we may do so by having God by our side. Jesus’s death on the cross has broken our chains to our sinful ways and offers us an escape from this prison by following Him. With Jesus, we have the power to follow good and reject evil.

As a young college student, it isn’t always easy for me to reject the worldly impulses I feel from within me as well as from my peers. Sometimes it may feel easier to give into evil than to fight it, especially since not everyone around me understands the significance of God’s sacrifice for us. When I slip up and give into sin, I feel God tugging on my heart and reminding me that it is not who I truly am. However, I find comfort in knowing that Jesus can help me steer away from the earthly things as long as I am willing to give myself over to Him. It is an extreme weight lifted off of my shoulders. Not only does inviting the Holy Spirit into our lives provide us with peace, but all the qualities of our Lord Jesus. God doesn’t want us to do this life alone, nor does He expect us to be able to. He gave us free will so that we would desire to have a relationship with Him and seek refuge.

PRAYER

Lord, help me to be more like you. Help me to hold onto the good inside of me and reject the sinful ways of the world. Take over my heart, my mind, and my life. Help me to get rid of the material things that our society values and the sins that I have been chained to. Thank you for sending your son Jesus to die for me, so that my sins may be forgiven. Amen.

Grace Kulp is part of the Worship Team and a Young Adult member of Wesley Freedom UMC

Saturday, December 12

THE SECOND SABBATH OF ADVENT

“If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath
and from doing as you please on my holy day,
if you call the Sabbath a delight
and the Lord’s holy day honorable,
and if you honor it by not going your own way
and not doing as you please or speaking idle words,
then you will find your joy in the Lord,
and I will cause you to ride in triumph on the heights of the land
and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob.”
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” (Isaiah 58:13-14)

PRAYER

Lord, help me make your Sabbath holy. Through your Holy Spirit, compel me to take the rest I need, and restrain me from withholding rest from others. Amen.

WEEK 3



Sunday, December 13

Isaiah 35:1-10

REFLECTION

Read today's scripture slowly and seek to picture the transformation taking place. If you have a creative side, you may want to draw, paint, or sculpt, the barren thirsty desert and then enjoy brining the landscape to life with cacti blooming, rabbits jumping, and water gushing forth from the rocks. In this beautiful vision, Isaiah reminds us of what God is capable of – even more, what God is hoping to accomplish in us and through us! God can bring renewal and healing to our lives. God can also transform the ways in which we live in community with each other. Consider today what is parched, broken, or gloomy about your life, family, or community. Focus in prayer inviting God to bring transformation. Welcome God to reveal to you the first step of the “highway” that can lead you into right and well relationship with God and others. These transformational journeys, not just the hoped-for destinations, are cause for great joy.

PRAYER FOR LIGHTING THE THIRD ADVENT CANDLE

Lord Jesus Christ, we ignite the candle of joy and claim your breakthrough presence in our lives. Transform our sorrow into song our sighing into praise. Not because there is no more hardship but because we have discovered your presence and promise to heal and bless us along the way. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Jennifer Smith is the Senior Pastor of Wesley Freedom UMC

Monday, December 14

Luke 1:39-56

REFLECTION

Mary has recently learned from the angel Gabriel that she will carry a child, the Son of God. She sets out to visit her relative, Elizabeth, who is also pregnant with a child, John, destined to be “great in the sight of the Lord” (Luke 1:15). When the two women meet, Elizabeth’s baby, John the Baptist, leaps for joy in the womb—Mary’s baby is Jesus and, in that recognition, there is joy and hope because the Messiah *is* hope. We understand because we, too, were filled with hope and wanted to leap for joy when we first encountered and recognized Jesus as our Savior. Scripture tells us that Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and boldly proclaims Mary’s blessedness, that she is carrying the promised one of Israel.

God is delivering a Savior to His people in the form of one of us. God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all present as Mary sings a song of praise to God and reminds us that the Lord’s original promise to Abraham is made manifest in our midst. In anticipation of Jesus’ birth, there is acknowledgement and appreciation for who God is and what He is doing in history.

PRAYER

God Almighty, during this Advent season, help us sing praise to you as Mary did. Let us also prepare our hearts and our spirits and our souls to glorify the Lord and the celebration of the coming anniversary of our Savior’s birth. Amen.

Robert Jacoby and Gina Eriksson are congregants of Wesley Freedom UMC

Tuesday, December 15

Hebrews 1:1-4

REFLECTION

My Dad was a skillful and proud carpenter by trade. He built and repaired countless building structures using his trade. As a younger man I was lucky to have many occasions to work with him in old home remodeling jobs. Old homes, as you know, were many times very challenging because the framing and floors had settled, boards had warped and various other conditions over time had taken toll on the structure of the building. Because of the flaws and settled conditions, there were many times that it was almost impossible to find a square corner or level surface when affixing new boards or making repairs or preparing to add a new feature to the home. Many times, we would be struggling for perfection and the advice of my Dad, who was a building perfectionist, was that the best we might be able to do was to keep the bubble in the level as close to ‘within the lines’ as possible.

In my mind this passage in Hebrews names the virtual lines which mark the fullness of information we need to keep our lives level. We have the prophets of old and now the wisdom of Christ and his teachings during his life on earth. Christ, the second virtual line, completes God’s revelation and lets us know, for sure, the will of God. This bubble, unlike the physical marker on my father’s tool level, is kindness, tolerance, patience, community outreach, being a good neighbor, good friend, good spouse, good parent, a role model to others, supporting our local church, and all other Christian virtues.

Keeping the “bubble” between the lines as we live and build our lives based on the words of the prophets and Christ’s teachings is a goal for me and I believe a lifetime goal for all of us.

PRAYER

Lord, you have spoken to us through the prophets of old, and finally through our Savior Jesus Christ. Having our level lines shown to us by your incarnate Son, give us the grace that we might live as Christ and the prophets have shown. In Christ’s name. Amen.

Richard Lawson is a member of the Worship Team at Wesley Freedom UMC

Wednesday, December 16

John 14:1-14

REFLECTION

After reading these verses I was left feeling grateful that God gave us Jesus and hopeful of the way he would lead us to heaven. Throughout this passage, the disciples are asking to see God so that they can believe in him. This offends Jesus because they have already seen God through him. He walks with them on Earth to invite them to know the Father because he is the way to the Father. God gave us his only Son in order to show himself to us. Since Jesus was human, people were able to make relationships with him. Humans have trouble trusting things they can't see, so Jesus should have made it much easier for people to believe in God. By giving us Jesus, God ensured that we could see him, believe in him, and create relationships as we know how. In Jesus, God shows that he wants to walk with us until we are called home to Heaven.

This gives me hope; hope in the fact that God wants to bring us home, so he gave us a path. Jesus says, "I will come and get you so that you will always be with me where I am. You know the way to where I am going." Jesus is telling his people that he is the way home, he will lead you there, all you have to do is believe. However, that believing part is what challenges disciples, then and now. The disciples still don't see God so, Philip says, "Show us the lord and we will be satisfied." Jesus just told them he is God; they had already seen him and yet they do not believe. God sent us a living image of himself to walk with us. All we have to do is have faith.

PRAYER

Dear God, I want to say thank you for all that you have given us, including your Son who gives us a path home to you. You have provided us with all that we need in order to know you and have made space in your house for when you call us home. I ask that you give us the strength to believe in you even when you appear to be absent and to provide us with discipline as we work to build and continue our relationship with you. Amen.

Hannah Bauer is a Young Adult member of Wesley Freedom UMC

Thursday, December 17
Hebrews 4:14-16

REFLECTION

It is hard to feel strong these days; we live in a broken world that is showing its cracks through disease, conflict, and violence. Even when we are not directly affected, we cannot ignore the suffering of our fellow humans. It is hard to feel like there is a plan or any sort of order in the world. Questions seem to be constantly going through my head: Why is there a pandemic devastating the world? Why are children killed in conflict? Why do people judge someone else's appearance instead of their heart? Why are the innocent the biggest victim? At times, it feels easy to acknowledge G-d's almighty power; but, in this year, I struggle with reconciling an almighty, all-good G-d with war, natural disasters, and the world's fear and hatred.

Today's verses can be read in a couple different ways. The first is that Jesus faced temptations and knows the morally dark corners of our hearts. But in the second way, we are reminded that He also knows the pain and grief of our human hearts, and Jesus can see our blind confusion. G-d might have a plan, but in Jesus, G-d's heart still breaks over the world. Jesus knows what it means to be fully human, and to go to G-d with this weight on His heart.

PRAYER

Father G-d, as we move through Advent, we lift up the trials and challenges that we face. Your children are hurting and scared. This has been a year of unrest, between the pandemic, social justice movements across the world, and conflicts. As we move closer to Christmas show us Your presence; remind us that we are not alone even though we cannot see You. When we doubt, reassure us. When we want to give up, hold us closer. When we turn away, let us feel Your presence and show us Your Holy Spirit. Amen.

Emily Rothstein is a Young Adult member of Wesley Freedom UMC

Friday, December 18

Philippians 2:1-11

REFLECTION

It was the perfect autumn day to spend in the woods at one of my favorite outdoor chapels. The sound of the rushing waters just over the ridge and the sight of the vibrant colors of the trees surrounding me brought a joy to my heart. I stretched out my arms, spun around, and took in a deep breath of the crisp fresh air, before sitting down to thank God for this incredible gift. I was so excited to begin exploring the majestic creation around me and opened my eyes to find a very young tree directly in front of me, bearing just three leaves. This perplexed me as the other trees appeared full and lovely. I was captivated by this small tree as the leaves seemed to cling tightly to the branches, while they danced harmoniously in the light breeze. Moments later, without warning, a gust of wind swelled up and the leaves were torn from the branch, leaving the tree completely bare.

Witnessing the tree shedding its leaves in all its splendor reminded me of the humility of Christ in becoming a servant to the point of death. Paul encourages us to be of this “same mind, having the same love.” The tree sacrifices its leaves so new life can bloom. Jesus, Son of God, sacrificed himself so we can have eternal life and God would be glorified. When Paul instructs us “look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others,” there is sacrifice to be made.

What does it mean to be of “the same mind and in full accord?” What thoughts do you (and I) need to change in order “to regard others as better than yourselves”?

PRAYER

Good and gracious Lord, help me to walk humbly with you. Open my eyes to the ways I put myself above others and help me to think of myself less and others more. Fill my heart with kindness, compassion, and gratitude, so that you alone may be glorified. Amen.

Ruth Whittenburg is a member of Wesley Freedom UMC

Saturday, December 19

THE THIRD SABBATH OF ADVENT

“Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns, so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.” (Deuteronomy 5:12-15)

PRAYER

Lord, help me make your Sabbath holy. Through your Holy Spirit, compel me to take the rest I need, and restrain me from withholding rest from others. Amen.

WEEK 4



Sunday, December 20

John 1:1-14

REFLECTION

I love the videos that show art conservators cleaning old paintings. In our minds the great paintings of the medieval and renaissance eras have a muted quality – everything has a browned or yellowed tint; the skies are gray and brilliant foliage is darkened. And yet, we know that this is the result of centuries of dirt and pollution in the air that has attached itself to these masterpieces. In these videos, the restorers take gentle chemicals and meticulously brush the dirty paintings; in due time, the patina of corruption is wiped away and the original brilliant pigments shine once again. These efforts are amazing, to be sure, but it remains unsettling to me that I could have looked at these tarnished paintings for decades and just assumed that they appeared as they should. They were corrupted! But nothing in my intuition would tell me there's anything wrong.

Today's Gospel presents a similar situation – though on a much grander scale, and much closer to home. John writes that our world has been covered in darkness and we can't even see it as it truly is! As we hear the story the world tells us, our intuition might never pick up on the corruption and distortion. It's how we've always seen the world; it just makes sense to us. But Christ's light cuts through the darkness just as the restorer's cleaner cuts through the grime. And this light from Christ – God's nature made flesh – is pure, unqualified, unconditional love.

If we want to see the world as it really is, if we want to cut through the corruption, if we want to see the glory of God's true creation, we start with the lens Christ gives us. We start with love. So, if you want to know your world and if you want to know your neighbor, begin with loving them. Then you will see in truth.

PRAYER FOR LIGHTING THE FOURTH ADVENT CANDLE

Light of the World, cut through our darkness. Remove the tarnish of lies and corruption that has built up upon our eyes and upon our hearts. Help us love all persons as you love them and see your world as it truly is. Amen.

Rev. Ian Collier is Associate Pastor of Wesley Freedom UMC

Monday, December 21

Matthew 2:7-12

REFLECTION

Lights, Camera, Action! Our Bible should be considered a cinematic masterpiece. With that in mind, isn't it marvelous how wonderfully entertaining it can be? God's word contains one poignant and meaningful story after another – exhilarating stories that are told in just a few verses. This scripture is a prime example. It features a drama filled with mystery, intrigue, adventure, diplomacy and, above all, fulfillment.

These Wise Men – Magi, sometimes considered Kings – were first and foremost inquisitive scholars. They studied manuscripts, legends and the heavens. They discovered the promised Star that heralded the birth of the greatest king. They were compelled to follow the “Bethlehem Star” and travel hundreds of miles to find this announced entity and worship him. It must have been an impressive caravan of royal splendor that braved the journey to where the Star led them. First, to Jerusalem where they encountered the quasi-king, Herod. Probably impressed with the Wise Men's entourage, he gave them audience and became inquisitive and somewhat alarmed with what they proposed. Using his advisors, he enlightened the Wise men to continue on to Bethlehem, just five miles away. This antagonist sends them there with ulterior motives. They go, they find, they worship, and they provide resources for another part of the greatest story ever told. God thwarts Herod's plans and sends the Magi home another way after accomplishing their mission.

Each of us, being wise, seeks to find, know and love our Creator. Jesus is God's gift to us. Born in the same fashion each of us were born, He can relate to every issue in our lives. I pray we each give Him our greatest resource, our life.

PRAYER

God, captivate us with your word. Draw us into your story just as deeply as you broke through into ours at Christmas. Help us to see your signs calling us to worship Christ, and follow them. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Victor Cison is a Small Group leader at Wesley Freedom UMC

Tuesday, December 22

Isaiah 58:1-10

REFLECTION

Advent. Webster explains it as the period beginning four Sundays before Christmas observed by Christians as a season of prayer and fasting. Hmm, prayer and fasting? That part has escaped me as I'm sure it has many. For most, the days leading up to Christmas are filled with shopping, food preparation, decorating, gaily wrapped packages, and total exhaustion. Fasting and praying?

Centuries ago, the Prophet Isaiah was a fearless and courageous man of God. He spoke of the coming of a Messiah who would save his people. As the children of Israel were going about their business, they had become flatly ritualistic in their worship. Isaiah admonished them regarding their practices. It should be more than religious ritual. It was a relationship with God! But even more than correct worship, a relationship with God meant real compassion for the poor, helpless, and oppressed among us. Isaiah was commanded to give them this urgent message: to repent of their ways that displeased God.

What does all this have to do with our lives in 2020? It appears as some things never change. We have just come through a year of disappointment and upheaval. As we grapple with change, some question if there is any hope. Yes, there is! Christ came declaring Himself to be the light of the world, our world, because without Him, His death and resurrection, we would remain in darkness and sin. He came that we might have life abundantly. This gives me great hope that better days are ahead, in God's time. Luke 21:28 tells us "to look up, for our redemption draws nigh." As I sit here reflecting on that night over 2000 years ago, I think about the star that stood over Bethlehem where Jesus lay, proclaiming the birth of our Savior, the One who came that we might have Life - Eternal Life.

PRAYER

Gracious God, as we again celebrate your birth, help us to be mindful of the need around us. Give us eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts that respond to what you have called us to be – your servants. Amen.

Alice Shank is a member of Wesley Freedom UMC

Wednesday, December 23

Matthew 5:1-16

REFLECTION

God is always with you. It's one of the truths we know and believe as followers of Jesus Christ. Though, sometimes it may not always seem that way. When you are struggling to stay afloat or when you lose a loved one, it is hard to believe that God is truly there, by your side, comforting you. Through today's scripture Jesus reaffirms the truth of his presence. He continuously states that you are blessed even when life goes wrong because God is there with you comforting you, filling you up, and calling you his child.

I know this is true, personally, because a few years back I lost someone extremely dear to me, my grandfather. When I heard that he had died I was devastated and couldn't imagine not being able to see or hear him ever again. So, I turned to God and prayed every night asking him to look out for my grandfather in heaven and to make sure he knew that I loved him. Every day that I prayed to God it got easier and easier to bear the weight of my grief. God was there with me every step of the way and comforted me in that time of struggle. That is how I know that God is with us every step of the way during all the struggles we are facing now. Throughout this COVID-19 season I hope you have been, and will continue with, turning to God with all your struggles and to allow him to comfort you.

PRAYER

Dear Father, thank you for always being there when times get rough and helping us through our struggles. I ask that you continue to help those who need you during this COVID-19 season and take care of those who have joined you in your Kingdom of Heaven. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Samantha Mailhot is a Youth member of Wesley Freedom UMC

CHRISTMAS EVE



Christmas Eve, December 24

Luke 2:1-20

REFLECTION

On this dark night, we look with longing for a star on the horizon. In this moment, where the sighs of the lonely, the cries of the grieving, and the petitions of the sick are all around us, we listen carefully for the song of angels. On this, the most hug-less year of our lives, we grope in a manger hoping that God's hand is still outstretched. Our season of Advent waiting is nearly complete. Time to put on our Christmas finery and go to church. Oh wait, the church is dark and quiet, a pandemic has sent us to our homes. What will we do?

There is only one thing to do: remember the beating heart of the incarnation. Jesus did not put on human flesh so that we can share a Christmas Eve visit with him each year. Jesus, God eternal, "became flesh and moved into the neighborhood." Jesus came, lived, died, and rose again to convince us that nothing can separate us from the love of God. Jesus shared life with messy, sinful, hurting, beautiful people to convince us that God is eager to be present in and transform the totality of our lives. This year, when we can't go for that most sacred ritual of sanctuary candle lighting, we have the opportunity to do the real work of Christmas.

Today, open the door of your home, the fullness of your family, the depths of heart and invite Jesus to come and stay. As you light your Advent wreath, invite hope, peace, love and joy to fill your life and then as you light the center candle pray and mean the words, "Come, Lord Jesus, Come."

PRAYER FOR LIGHTING THE CHRIST CANDLE

Lord Jesus, you are the light of the world; on this Christmas Eve night, ignite hope, flame peace, spark joy, and let your love warm this home.

[Light the four outer candles]

And now, Lord Jesus, as we celebrate your coming to us in Bethlehem, we invite you to take your rightful place as the center of our home and our lives. Come, Lord Jesus, come! Come and save us, come and love us, come and lead us this night and always. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Jennifer Smith is the Senior Pastor of Wesley Freedom UMC



Christmas Day, December 25

Titus 2:11-14

REFLECTION

Now unto us a child is born...

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth...

These two opening lines of Scripture are very familiar to most. They denote Christ's entry into human history through the womb of Mary and again through the eschatological womb of God. In between these two glorious appearances, those who claim Jesus as Christ are expected to live a life worthy of his sacrificial life, death and resurrection.

In this pastoral epistle, Titus is instructed to remind those in Crete that many false teachers will arise to proclaim a message antithetical to the character of God and God's people. They are to resist this empty rhetoric and hold fast to the truth they heard when their hearts were set ablaze as they came to know the Lord. Human systems, often referred to as "worldly passions," continually tempt those who follow Christ to be distracted from the work of salvation. Our discipleship should be at work in the world, in and out of season, to extol the real Good News of God. And, while it is true that good works will not produce salvation, they are the fruit of a transformed life.

This year has been a year of struggle, death, loneliness, loss and lament. The twin pandemics have ravaged our world in ways not seen for generations. And, it has also been a year filled with resilience, strength, over-coming, creativity and hope. Yet, some among us, would argue there has been no hope this year. Some would cry out that because we continue to face political, financial, medical, and even denominational challenges, there is no hope this year.

CHRISTMAS DAY



Beware! False prophets continue to spread false messages.

Our hope isn't conveyed through a movie on the Hallmark Channel or cards embossed with ornaments and convivial images. Hope isn't just imparted through sanctuaries decked in greenery and voices raised in Christmas carols. No, hope is conveyed by citizens standing on long lines to cast votes that resound in freedom ringing; hope is conveyed through strangers of every hue gathering to march down bloody streets shining a light on injustice and inhumanity; hope is conveyed through the faithful gathering across denominations to demand that a detained father and husband seeking asylum be returned home. Hope comes when the children of light beat back the darkness. Hope comes when the sound of the righteous drowns out the screeching of the false prophets. Hope comes when the followers of Jesus Christ remember who they are and abundantly live their faith out loud.

Hope comes when skilled servant workers of today recall the grace of the manger and lean into the glory of Christ's coming again. Hope is alive when we continue to do all the good we can, even if in unconventional ways.

PRAYER

God of grace and God of glory, on thy people pour thy power. When we remember who we are we are living a merry Christmas.

Bishop La'Trelle Miller Easterling is the Bishop of The Baltimore-Washington Conference of The United Methodist Church



MERRY
CHRISTMAS