

# *Weeks 5 & 6*

*Devotions for ADVENT through EPIPHANY*



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN  
Church of Nashville

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## Sunday, December 27

THIRD DAY of CHRISTMAS

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### Read

Galatians 4:4-7

### Reflect

In only 4 verses, we can see that Paul was a master of the Greek language, and he knew his audience very well. Here, he is drawing on customs and concepts the Galatians would have been familiar with as he reshapes them in light of the Gospel message. Beginning with those very first words “when the fullness of time had come.” Not a day sooner, but in God’s perfect timing, Christ was born. And He was “born to a woman”, not a princess or queen, not a priestess, but an ordinary young woman. And He was “born under the law.” Jesus was born into the same system of rules and regulations, both politically and religiously, as everyone else at that time. He did not take a place above the law, so He could “redeem those who were under the law” – that’s us!

All of this came together “so that we might receive adoption as sons (and daughters).” Adoption in the Roman world looked much different than what we’re used to, “a Roman child became an adult at the sacred family festival known as the *Liberalia*, held annually on March 17th. At this time the child was formally adopted by the father as his acknowledged son and heir” (James Montgomery Boice).

Adoption in the Roman world (the world to which Paul is writing his letter) was an official recognition of one’s belonging to a family. And to belong is not only to have a place, but also to have an inheritance (“heir”). When Paul reminds us that we are heirs with Christ, it is a radical claim. We are not just slaves or servants to God (as many of the pagan religions of that time would suggest), but we are sons and daughters. We have an intimacy granted through adoption that we can call the Creator of the universe “Abba” which translated means “Daddy” or “Papa” – an address only used in the familial context.

### Respond

Here’s the kicker for me: God did not have to work out the redemption of the world in this way. He’s God. There were countless options for how He could have executed His plan to save us from sin and death and disobedience. But He chose this intimate, empathetic, kind, unexpected way. I would have been content to be saved and considered a slave in the household of God. But God was not content to have us working away in a distant corner of the house. He wanted (and wants) us close. Yes, we are still to obey. Yes, we are still servants, but it is out of love and relationship. That is remarkable! How does that truth, “God wants us close,” affect the way you speak to and about God?

### Pray

*Abba, thank you for your extravagant love made known in your Son, Jesus Christ. Thank you for wanting us, not just as slaves, but as children! Help us to better live into our identity as your children that the world might see a striking resemblance between us and our Father. In the name of Christ we pray, Amen.*

THE REV. SARAH BIRD KNEFF

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## Monday, December 28

FOURTH DAY *of* CHRISTMAS

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### **Read**

Matthew 2:13-18

### **Reflect**

How many times have you started a sentence or a thought with “everything will be fine when...”? Joseph and Mary likely had a few “everything will be fine when” moments. Everything will be fine when we get to Bethlehem. Everything will be fine when the baby comes. No sooner do the wise men leave than an angel visits Joseph in a dream and tells him to take Mary and Jesus and run for their lives. Everything is most definitely not fine. The holy family is forced to flee violent infanticide while they carry the Prince of peace in their arms. Everything is far from fine in this story. It is filled with trauma, violence, and fear, and yet Jesus has been born. Emmanuel, the Prince of Peace is here.

The good news of Christmas is that God does not wait for everything to be fine to enter the world. And God doesn't wait for everything to be fine to enter our lives. If the manger teaches us anything, it is that God wants to be in our lives, regardless of whether or not we have prepared room. St. Augustine wrote that “our hearts are restless until they rest in [God].” There is a lot to be restless about in this story. There remains a lot to be restless about in our world. Everything will be fine when our hearts rest in Jesus.

### **Respond**

Directly after the Prince of peace enters the world, violence follows. Herod is not ready for Christ to come. In what ways are you not ready for Christ to come? How have you hurt yourself or others in an effort to resist God's choice to be with you?

Even in the midst of incredible pain and grief, Christ is in the world. What pain and grief are you carrying that Christ could enter into? What are the injustices, the sorrows, the longings and losses that get in the way of your relationship with God?

What does the statement “everything will be fine when...” look like in your life right now? What are you waiting for? What do you feel like you need to set right before you welcome Christ in your heart?

### **Pray**

*My heart is restless until it rests in Thee, O God. Break through my defenses. Wake me up to your presence. Teach me to rest in you. Amen.*

THE REV. ADAM DEVRIES

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## Tuesday, December 29

FIFTH DAY *of* CHRISTMAS

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### Read

Psalm 148

### Reflect

*Q. If a tree were to fall on an uninhabited island, would there be any sound?*

*A. Sound is vibration, transmitted to our senses through the mechanism of the ear, and recognized as sound only at our nerve centers. The falling of the tree or any other disturbance will produce vibration of the air. If there be no ears to hear, there will be no sound.*

Scientific American, April 5, 1884

Albert Einstein fell out of favor with fellow physicists for disagreeing with that perspective. He is reported to have asked a friend, “Do you really believe that the moon only exists if you look at it”?

Here’s an analogy: If no one praises the Lord, is he still God? Hold that thought for a moment.

Psalm 148, the third of five concluding hymns of praise in the Psalter, is a summons for literally everything that exists to praise the Lord: heavenly beings and bodies (verses 1-4), earthly creatures and earth (verses 7-10); humans great and small, old and young (verses 11-12). Why praise? Because the Lord created everything and faithfully saves his people. The Lord is worthy of praise, and in the Psalmist’s view, even non-human creatures have a way to praise him.

So, what’s the answer to my question: if praise ends, does God? I would say that even if praise ended, God would still be God. I’m with Einstein: “Do you really think that God exists only if you acknowledge him?”

But I do have this qualifier: God chooses to be “enthroned on the praises of” his people (Psalm 22:3). God chooses to be God as the one who is Immanuel, God-with-us, and wants to be God in no other way.

It’s unlikely that the praise of God will ever end, as long as there is a world. World without end, there always will be the people of God, somewhere on the earth. It might not be the same places to which we’re accustomed. After all, most of those cities where Paul founded churches don’t have churches anymore. There’s no reason that couldn’t happen in Nashville or New York or Nashua.

### Respond

What will happen when COVID-19 restrictions lift? Will people return to praise the Lord? Will you?

### Prayer

*Lord, open the ears of your church to hear this call to praise. Renew in us the habits of worship, when restrictions are lifted and we are tempted to leave the praises to someone else. Be enthroned on our praises, Lord Jesus! Amen.*

DR. STUART R. GORDON

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## Wednesday, December 30

SIXTH DAY of CHRISTMAS

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### Read

2 Peter 3:8-13

### Reflect

The shepherd boy David became the king of Israel a thousand or so years before his heir, the Prince of Peace, would be born in Bethlehem. The Lord promises to David, in 2 Kings, that his house would be without end. That eventually a child of David's descendants would be born to rescue and govern the world forever. 500 years after David's death, and therefore 500 years before the birth of Jesus, the dream of an unending and glorious dynasty seemed like a forgotten dream, a broken promise. Generations of exile had left Israel wondering if the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had called it quits. Then, in the fullness of time, when hope had nearly been extinguished, the virgin Mary conceived and born a child to be the King of the ages, Almighty God. This was Christ's first Advent, His first coming.

In our text, Peter is responding to false teachers who scoff at the Christians belief that Jesus will keep his promise to come again and set all things right. Peter hits these falsehoods head on, "But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." The Lord has never felt compelled to conform his timetable to our wishes. God has always been faithful to his promises. God was faithful to raise up a shoot from the stump of Jesse in the first Advent of our Lord and Savior. And God will be faithful in the second advent of the Son to judge the quick and the dead. He will come to establish the new heavens and the new earth. We live in that now but not yet. And we trust the promise-keeping God to come again.

### Respond

What does it look like for you and your family to live in the light of Christ's second coming? In Jesus' own words, "Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into" (Matthew 24:42-43). Jesus uses the metaphor of sleep and wakefulness. The popular phrase these days is "woke-ness". But what does it look like to be "woke" to the ways of God and the promises of Christ's work and return in our world?

### Pray

*Lamb of God, already from the manger we see the shadow of the cross. This is your world to do as you wish. I surrender to your rule in my life and in this world. May your peaceable kingdom be expanded in and through my life. Amen.*

DR. RYAN V. MOORE

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## Thursday, December 31

SEVENTH DAY *of* CHRISTMAS

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### Read

1 Kings 3:5-14; John 8:12-19

### Reflect

Young Solomon asks for the gift that would bring him blessings throughout his life: wisdom. Solomon will later demonstrate that wisdom when two prostitutes come fighting over an infant. Solomon commands the baby be cut in two: half given to each. One mother cries out, "No!" Solomon gives the child to the mother who has compassion for the child. His wisdom discerns the motives of others. In the John passage, Jesus is in Jerusalem at the Festival of Tabernacles. All are living outside in temporary booths on rooftops and the streets. At night these would be illuminated with lamps filling Jerusalem with light. Also, part of the celebration was to light four large oil lamps in the Temple courtyard that penetrated all of Jerusalem. Then men would dance before the lamps with burning torches in their hands. This truly created a festival of lights. It is probably at this moment Jesus declares, "I am the Light of the world."

### Respond

On this Seventh Day of Christmas, let us unwrap the gift of wisdom. It is said that we live in the age of information. Some think that just having the information and knowledge is wisdom. No, wisdom is having the insight of how to use the information to create mercy, justice, and peace. Jesus said, "Whoever follows me will never walk-in darkness but will have the light of life." The Psalmist says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Let us be in awe of Jesus Christ, and let his ways become our ways and discover wisdom.

### Pray

*Gracious heavenly Father, you have given us the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ, the Light of the World. Illumine our paths as we follow Jesus. Give us the wisdom to use all our blessings for your honor and glory bringing mercy, justice, and peace into the world. As we celebrate the gift of the New Year tonight, may we be filled with hope because the darkness has been filled with light through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

DR. JOHN L. MUSGRAVE

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**Friday, January 1**  
EIGHTH DAY of CHRISTMAS

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**Read**

Matthew 25:31-46

**Reflect**

The depiction of the judgment of the nations in the Gospel of Matthew can lead to a sense of insecurity. We want to make a checklist of good things to do before we die. When did we last visit a person in prison or care for the sick? We may feel a responsibility to bring Jesus or to even “be” Jesus to these less fortunate souls.

But perhaps the words of Jesus can lead us to a different focus. Jesus says to those who did serve faithfully in these various deeds of mercy, “Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family you did it to me.” They have, indeed, followed in Jesus’ examples of service and care of the needs of the people he met. By doing so, they have served Jesus without an awareness of the import of their actions.

How can we be sustained in a ministry of giving to others in Jesus’ name? Jesus urges us not to seek to be Jesus, for this is an impossible task for any human being. Instead, Jesus asks us to see Jesus in others, especially in those the world would deem “the least of these.”

**Respond**

As you begin a new year, you may be considering your resolutions and goals. Are you listing “good works” and service ministries you would like to participate in?

What is the relationship between our faith and good works? Read James 2:14-18 and Ephesians 2:8-10. Are we saved by good works or by faith? What do you believe to be the relationship between faith and good works? If one has faith in Jesus Christ, will good works follow?

Prayerfully consider your talents and gifts, your opportunities for service and the needs of our community. Where is God calling you to serve?

**Prayer**

*Gracious God, we thank you for this new year. As we take the time to reflect on the year ahead, help us to be aware of the wondrous gift of our faith and the gifts and abilities and talents you have given to us. Give us eyes to see, with compassion, the needs of others. May we serve, as we are led by your Holy Spirit, with humility and the love you give to us, seeing in others our Savior Jesus Christ. May we see such opportunities for ministry and service as a privilege and an opportunity to show our gratitude to you for the many blessings that are ours. May we see each moment as a holy moment, for you are always with us. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.*

DR. SANDRA L. RANDLEMAN

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**Saturday, January 2**  
NINTH DAY of CHRISTMAS

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**Read**

James 3:13-18

**Reflect**

There is heavenly wisdom and devilish wisdom. Selfish ambition, arrogance, and envy will cultivate a devilish wisdom. That sort of wisdom can get one quite a lot in this world—power, money, etc. Proverbs 9:10 says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom...” That sort of wisdom can get one quite a lot in this world too—gentle works, peace, good fruits, etc. Heavenly wisdom births gentle works in a good life. Devilish wisdom births harsh works in a hellish life. Certainly, a person attempting to faithfully follow Jesus would only be interested in heavenly wisdom. It seems so simple, and yet, we all know that it is not. It is so tempting to want to cultivate a wisdom that is not from above. Things like peace and mercy can be so hard to truly desire and pursue. The holiday season shines a sanctifying light on all of this. At the end of the year, when we assess our finances, the way we went about our business, when we gather with family, and consider how we have treated one another throughout the year, when most will go to church, and consider what they have given their faith; all of this is a fine metric to consider the sort of wisdom one was truly after in their year.

I heard a comedian make a joke about this year, saying, “You know the story of the three little pigs? 2020 is the big bad wolf that exposed what kind of house you built. If your house was built of straw or sticks, it was obvious this year.” It seems that 2020 may be the year that exposed the sort of wisdom one was cultivating in their life. The invitation that this year extends to us is to consider what we can build upon for next year and consider where our efforts need to be redirected in 2021. May we be a faith community that longs for the wisdom from above.

**Respond**

What has 2020 exposed in your life? Who would you consider to be a person who possesses a heavenly wisdom? Why?

What needs to change in 2021 for you? Your family? Your community? Our church? How might Jesus be calling you to build a different house in the coming season?

**Pray**

*Father above, you oppose the proud and give grace to the humble. Gift us the mercies we need this day to be humble and baptize our imagination for the good fruits that are to come. Amen.*

THE REV. JOSH RODRIGUEZ

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**Sunday, January 3**  
TENTH DAY *of* CHRISTMAS

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**Read**

Ephesians 1:3-14

**Reflect**

At the beginning of his letter to the Ephesians, Paul reminds us that we are chosen even before the world was created, and concludes that we “should be holy and blameless before him.” This truth, that God takes away our sin through the guiltless sacrifice of his Son, Jesus Christ, has taken on deeper meaning for me over the years. When I was younger, an adolescent growing up in my father’s church, I never smoked or drank alcohol, I didn’t curse or go to the “bad parties.” I believed that I was a pretty good person, and so the redemption offered in Christ was nice, but didn’t strike me as life-changing. I didn’t really have much to be saved from I believed. So for a while, my faith was in some ways, cheap or stilted.

19th century Baptist preacher, Charles Spurgeon, once wrote, “If you think little of what God has done for you, you will do very little for him; but if you have a great notion of his great mercy to you, you will be greatly grateful to your gracious God.”

It is only until we recognize the depth of our need for God that we can truly embrace the vastness of God’s grace. If our view of sin is limited to alcohol, cigarettes, and sex (as it was for me in my teens), then our understanding of God’s grace is limited as well.

**Respond**

It wasn’t until I began to delve more deeply into the Scriptures and wrestle with my inner struggles with pride, selfishness, envy and fear, that I realized how great my need was (and is) for a Savior. Now, Paul’s words about our acceptance by God through Christ, our identity as children of God, and the gift of the Holy Spirit for our journey, resonate with abiding truth in my heart!

We don’t do this often, but take some time to think of your sin. Be as specific as you can and picture those sins stacked on top of each other separating you from God. Sit with the isolation and hopelessness of that separation. Then think of the Christmas story we just celebrated – the sending of Christ to save the world. Perhaps picture the manger and the wall of sin crumbling before it. Reflect on the unexpected rescue and undeserved grace. Ask that God would increase your comprehension of His mercy and grace.

**Pray**

*Gracious Lord, we are often blind to how frequently we miss the mark. We take your grace for granted. We stumble through confession rushing hurriedly toward forgiveness without recognizing the sacrifice you made. In your love, help us to understand a bit more about our need so we can receive more fully your grace in Jesus Christ. It is in his name we ask these things, Amen.*

THE REV. SARAH BIRD KNEFF

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**Monday, January 4**  
ELEVENTH DAY *of* CHRISTMAS

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**Read**

Proverbs 3:1-12

**Reflect**

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. This year has provided us with a plethora of opportunities to practice confusion and disorientation. According to Proverbs, misunderstanding may not be a bad thing. When we trust in our own ability, capacity, and understanding we have no need to trust in the Lord. But when we are wise in our own eyes, we choose the way of lonely arrogance rather than mysterious faith. Proverbs 3 encourages us to get curious and take a closer look at our inner life. Perhaps the confusion and disorientation of 2020 is actually an invitation to put Proverbs 3 into practice—to trust in the Lord.

When a couple has their first child, their lives are reoriented. What does it mean to have this other life as a part of the family? Something similar takes place with the Christ child. Christ invites us into a different way of living - into a reorientation. Our orientation is not around our own abilities, capacities, or understanding. When we orient our lives around the Christ child, we trust in the Lord with all our heart and lean not on our own understanding. In all our ways we acknowledge that GOD is up to something big and has invited us to be a part of it.

**Respond**

What have you been using to orient your life around this year?

As you look to 2021 what would it look like to trust in the Lord more than yourself?

Where are the places that you have not acknowledged God?

Are you wise in your own eyes or are you open to the mystery of God's presence and love?

The Christ has come. What would it look like to orient your life around the Christ child?

**Pray**

*Teach me to trust in you with all my heart, O God. I confess I'm afraid to lean not on my own understanding. Reorient my life around your mercy and grace. In the name of the Christ child, Amen.*

THE REV. ADAM DEVRIES

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**Tuesday, January 5**  
TWELFTH DAY of CHRISTMAS

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**Read**

Psalm 96

*The reign of God is God's activity as creator and maintainer of the universe, and as judge and savior who shapes the movement of history toward the purposes of God.*

James Luther Mays

**Reflect**

2020 was not the year when chaos finally spilled over its boundaries to engulf the creation. 2020 was not the year that a pandemic made a mockery of all human plans and designs. 2020 was not the year that democracy finally broke. 2020, as horrible as it was (and continues to be in 2021), is another year in which the God and Father of Jesus Christ providentially cared for the world that he made and reconciled to himself in Christ, and to which he will return in glory.

This is a confession of faith, based not on empirical data but upon the character and saving deeds of the Lord. The Psalmist says it this way, and we do well to let him teach us: "The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved."

Karl Barth describes faith as a great "nevertheless." People who know the living God look life squarely in the face with grace and conviction and declare, "The LORD reigns!" That is how the Israelites endured slavery in Egypt and exile in Babylon. It is how they persisted through centuries, awaiting their Messiah. It is how Jesus, while suffering the depths of pain and rejection, said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," and "into your hands I commit my spirit." It is how the earliest disciples endured jailing and even beating, only to rejoice in the privilege of suffering for the sake of the Name.

**Respond**

The LORD reigns! The people who realize this flock to the sanctuary, taking their offerings, dressed in their best (verses 7-9). Their faithfulness, commitment, and joy bear witness to all the purveyors of dread and doubt that there is something more real and lasting than the troubles of 2020 or 1968 or 1941 or 587 BC. The world is firmly established and will not be moved, because the world is ruled by the very good and very great Lord God.

**Prayer**

*Teach us by your Word, O Lord: the world is firmly established because you reign. Lead us in that truth and teach us, for you are the God of our salvation, through Jesus Christ the Lord.  
Amen.*

DR. STUART R. GORDON

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## Wednesday, January 6

EPHIPHANY *of the LORD*

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### Read

Matthew 2:1-12; Isaiah 60:1-6

### Reflect

In many ways, Epiphany is where our story begins. Epiphany is where the likes of you and me enter this cosmic drama of God's redeeming love. The Magi are the first outsiders to the manger. I should clarify, they are the first ethnic outsiders: wealthy, educated, pagan, astrologers, from a distant land. To use the language of the New Testament, they are Gentiles. They come with gifts and they leave for home by another way. There is no sequel to their story, so we can't say if their meeting with Jesus was a one-off audience between kings or if they would go on to honor Jesus as the King of kings. Nevertheless, so much hope creeps into their gift-bearing visit for those of us outside that original covenant community of God's chosen people.

Upon closer inspection of the Scriptures, we shouldn't be surprised to find Gentiles invited to the mystery of the manger. There were channel markers all throughout the Bible that this was part of God's plan all along. One of those signposts is right there in Isaiah, "And all nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising" (60:3). Epiphany offers a word of comfort, but it is also a threat. Jesus intends to be king over all nations. Kings of every nation will readily or otherwise bend the knee. Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon the world.

### Respond

It is hard to remember that we come to the faith, even if we're from a long line of Christians, as outsiders. We don't come to the faith by birthright. We come to the faith, and all its intended blessings, by adoption. God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, as Paul says in Galatians 4, so that we might call God our "Abba," our Father. Our story is shaped more by the narrative of an orphan than it is by biology. And the lengths God goes to claim us travels from heaven to manger to cross to empty tomb to the very throne room of Almighty God.

### Pray

*Jesus, I come to the manger with the best gifts we can, broken lives and shattered dreams. It is all I have to give you, but I give my life willingly and joyfully. You alone can rescue me from my sin. Don't leave me as I am. Use me to glorify your name. Amen.*

DR. RYAN V. MOORE