

**2025  
ADVENT  
GUIDE**

**Lighting the  
Way Forward**



**An Advent Guide for Lectionary Year A  
from the North Carolina Council of Churches**



## AN INTRODUCTION

As we journey through the Advent season, we are invited to reflect on the profound hope that the birth of Jesus Christ brought into a world often shrouded in darkness. Our news headlines are filled with constant reminders of the need for God's redemption in the world. In a time of waiting, expectation, and longing for God's peace and presence, Advent offers us the chance to consider how Christ, the Light of the World, continues to illuminate our paths today.

The theme of "Lighting the Way Forward" invites us to look beyond the current circumstances, look past the familiar rituals of this season, and focus on the deeper meaning of Christ's coming. Jesus did not just come to bring light to a distant past, but to guide us into the future, helping us navigate the challenges, uncertainties, and struggles we face.

We are moving closer to the fulfillment of God's promises. Christ, our Light, leads us out of the darkness and into the newness of life. This season is not only about remembering the past and embracing our present but anticipating the future—where God's light will continue to shine, leading us forward in faith, hope, and love.

In the days ahead, may these reflections draw you nearer to the One who has come, and will come again, Lighting the Way Forward.

Sean Allen  
*Finance and Administration Director*

# FIRST SUNDAY

Isaiah 2:1-5



The prophets speak to a people living in violence and uncertainty, yet daring to hope for peace. Isaiah dares to hope for swords hammered into plowshares, spears reshaped into pruning hooks, and cities once scarred by conflict becoming gardens of life.

That same vision speaks to us today in direct contradiction to the rhetoric of empire. Empire offers us leaders who speak of an “enemy within,” turning neighbor against neighbor. They portray our inner cities as battlegrounds and our communities as training grounds for war. This is more than political rhetoric; it is a spiritual distortion. It perverts God’s call and instead of unlearning war, it teaches suspicion.

God’s call during Advent is the antidote to empire. Where the empire tells us to arm ourselves, Advent invites us to disarm. Where empire’s leaders point to enemies, Advent calls us to see neighbors. Where fear whispers “protect what’s yours,” God’s Spirit urges, “share what you have.”

Advent peace isn’t naïve or sentimental. It’s not pretending the world isn’t broken. Peace is the courage to live differently in a world that wants us to be afraid. It is choosing connection over isolation, compassion over cynicism, gentleness over control.

Isaiah’s words still echo:

*“Neighbors shall not lift up sword against neighbor,  
neither shall they learn war anymore.”*

We must ask, what might Isaiah’s vision look like in our time? It might look like guns melted into playgrounds, prisons turned into schools, military budgets redirected to healthcare.

It might also look like smaller acts of peace: a table where those who disagree sit down and listen to one another, a community that refuses to demonize the poor or the refugee, a church that creates belonging for the anxious, the grieving, and the weary.

Peace is not the absence of violence — it is the presence of love. It is allowing ourselves to see God’s vision, even when it seems impossible. The impossible begins wherever we are willing to lay down our swords — the swords of our words, our defensiveness, our self-protection — and pick up the tools that tend to life: kindness, empathy, and hope.

This Advent, may we dare to imagine God’s world made new.

*Carrilea Hall*  
*Partners in Health and Wholeness Associate Director*



# SECOND SUNDAY

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19



The righteous shall flourish

This Psalm is both a prayer and a prophecy, describing the ideal ruler whose reign is marked by justice, compassion, prosperity, and universal rule. In a time when the world feels restless and uncertain, it is good to be reminded of the biblical description of an ideal leader, whether it's national, state, and local government, or school superintendents, healthcare providers, and family systems. Anyone who holds power and influence over others would do well to read this description.

This Psalm reminds us that leadership shaped by love and righteousness is essential, and we each have a part to play in bringing that vision to fruition. Sometimes the work is quiet and deliberate: writing letters to our representatives encouraging them to act with fairness and compassion. Other times, it is bold and public: joining in peaceful demonstrations like Moral Monday or No Kings Day. Always, we are called to stand for the justice and dignity of all people.

In every act of faithfulness, whether large or small, we echo the hope of this ancient song. We become part of the prayer it sings: the prayer that our world will one day be ruled not by power or pride, but by the enduring strength of justice, mercy, and love.

“May they defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor.” There is no better time to stand up for justice than now when the very definition of justice is challenged from all sides. With the help of Immanuel, God with us, all things are possible when we have faith and do our part!

*God of hope, As we joyfully await the glorious coming of Christ, we pray to you for the needs of the church and the world. Hear our humble prayer that we may serve you in holiness and faith and give voice to your presence among us until the day of the coming of your Son, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns forever and ever. Amen.*

Donna Parks Hill  
Partners in Health and Wholeness Associate Director

# THIRD SUNDAY

Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm 146:5-10



To fathom the theme of joy for this third week of Advent feels disillusioning and paradoxical to the present realities in which we live. Perhaps joy is impossible to comprehend.

We are painfully aware of the chaos and sorrow that surround us. The weight of the world presses hard upon our hearts and it's exhausting to hold so much ache within us. It can feel like we are standing in the middle of Isaiah's wilderness — dry, cracked ground under our feet, longing for streams of justice to flow again. In a world groaning under the weight of pain and division, we long for God's joy to break in.

And yet, into this very landscape, the prophet dares to speak of *blossoms*. "The desert shall rejoice and bloom." Joy appears here not as denial, but as defiance — the wild and holy insistence that God is making all things new.

Mary knew that same kind of joy. Her song, the Magnificat, doesn't come from comfort or ease — it rises from courage and conviction. She sings of a God who scatters the proud, fills the hungry, and lifts up the lowly. Her joy is a form of resistance, proclaiming that even amid empire and uncertainty, God's justice is already breaking in.

This is the invitation of Advent joy: to cultivate a joy that

can live alongside lament. A joy that joins in God's dream for a world made whole. A joy that blooms even when the soil of our souls feels tired.

So, we continue lighting candles. We show up. We tend our communities offering healing and justice. We trust that joy is not a shallow emotion, but is the deep current of God's presence moving through us — now and forever more.

*Meredith Rawls*

*Partners in Health and Wholeness Regional Coordinator*

# FOURTH SUNDAY

Matthew 1:18-25



On this Fourth Sunday of Advent, the Gospel of Matthew tells us Joseph finds himself in a moment of quiet crisis. Faced with Mary's unexpected pregnancy, he plans to step away quietly from his betrothed—until a divine message invites him into a deeper path. Rather than judge or reject, Joseph chooses love, trust, and courage. He embraces God's unexpected plan and becomes a protector of sacred life.

Joseph's story is not just about obedience—it's about embodying justice. His choice reflects a faith that sees beyond convention and fear. In our world fractured by divisions—race, immigration status, religion, gender, and more—his example reminds us that justice often begins in the quiet decisions to honor one another's dignity.

As members of the North Carolina Council of Churches, we know this calling well. We come from diverse traditions, but we are united by the shared belief that faith must be lived out in the public square—with compassion, courage, and an unwavering commitment to justice. Through advocacy, education, and collective action, the Council continues to lead in welcoming the stranger, caring for creation, confronting racism, and defending the vulnerable.

This Advent, as we light the fourth candle, the candle of love, and prepare to welcome the Christ child once more,

let us follow Joseph's lead. Let us listen deeply for God's voice urging us to choose love over fear, and act with justice—even when the path is uncertain. Christ comes not through privilege, but through those willing to trust in love's power to transform the world.

May we carry that love into our communities—as people of faith, as co-laborers for justice, and as bearers of the light we now await.

*Susannah Tuttle*  
*Eco-Justice Connection Director*



# CHRISTMAS DAY

Psalm 96



In recent months, musical choices for many have changed as we have found ourselves humming dirges and penning requiems describing the slow death of Democracy. Even when we tried to lift our voices jubilantly, it felt like we were singing in a strange land. Now, here we are during “the most wonderful time of year,” wondering what to sing with so much uncertainty surrounding our employment, health care, and voting rights.

The psalmist reminds us to sing “a new song.” No, not the newly released Christmas album of our favorite artists, but a song that exalts the reign of a God who is not only in control of our past and current conditions, but a deity of our future reality. Salvation is coming. Help is on the way.

We can sing, looking beyond our fractured earthly government and human rulers, whose decisions have disrupted our lives. We sing because good news has broken through and the ruler of the cosmos is not one in title or executive orders alone.

We are called to righteousness and truth, so while our voices may be weak, we sing because God’s justice will be reflected through our actions and service to our communities and our world.

*Arlecia Simmons*

*Partners in Health and Wholeness Associate Director*

# FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

Matthew 2:13-23



It's an old, old story. This world's tyrants rage and innocent people die. Just as Jesus did, we live in a world where innocent people suffer and tyrants get away with murder.

It's enough to make you long for God to throw out thunderbolts, or light some avenging fire, or send a few plagues in the direction of our enemies. Or at least, throw up an invisible shield, and protect innocent people.

But God doesn't oppose violence with violence. And God doesn't protect us from the consequences of human freedom. So innocent people suffer and die, as this world's tyrants rage.

But terror is not the last word, not for Herod, not for us.

Terror will not have the last word. Sometimes, that is hard to believe. Sometimes it seems like there is no limit to the evil human beings will visit on one another, no end to the suffering of God's holy innocents.

No, terror will not have the last word. God keeps bringing Jesus back to us, after the tyrants think he's been destroyed. Herod rages, but Jesus comes back from Egypt to Galilee. The Roman authorities execute him, but God brings Jesus through death into new life.

Terror is not the last word for God and so it is not the last word for us.

Jesus goes into the darkness with us, enters the violence of our world. Christ is there with every parent afraid for their children's safety; with every terrified woman fleeing a violent man; with every refugee seeking safe haven. God is at work in violent places, at work in the witness of peacemakers, in congregations that bring hope and light into troubled communities.

Today, God calls each one of us to join that work of love, to stand for peace in our world, our country, our neighborhoods, our households, and our own hearts.

Thanks be to God, terror is not the last word for us. The Word made flesh, the first and the last, Jesus the Christ, God with us.

*Sean Allen*  
*Finance and Administration Director*

# EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

Isaiah 60:1-6



Can you see it; the scene Isaiah is creating with these words? For the people who hear Isaiah's words, this scene is a fantasy. They are forsaken people, having been invaded by a neighboring country years earlier. Some folks remained in their own towns living among the ruins of pillaged farms, destroyed infrastructure, and demolished houses. Some escaped and fled as refugees to other lands that were not being destroyed by war and famine. Some were captured and moved to other places, forced to make a new life in a foreign land. The events preceding these words from Isaiah afflicted the people of Judah almost 2500 years ago. But I can think of several other places where this very thing is happening at this very moment . . .

In the face of such a catastrophe, with trauma living on through the generations, Isaiah dares to proclaim this Word from the Lord:

*"... your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried in their nurses' arms (v. 4)."*

The people hearing these words have not seen their children in decades, but Isaiah presents them with a picture of boys and girls coming to meet their parents because that's how their parents remember them—small children, dependent children, children unable to survive without the care of a concerned adult. That care is typically provided by parents until the child is old enough to survive alone, but these parents were separated from their children—at the border.

There are other unlikely scenes offered by Isaiah to this group of forsaken people. New wealth will arrive by sea on ships and by land on camels. Nations and their leaders will come to pay homage with offerings of gold and frankincense (items that will also be laid at the feet of the baby Jesus half a millennium later). The glory of the Lord “will appear over you” (v. 2).

These are wonderful sights to behold, but it is the images of the children that stop my heart. Coupled with the destruction of the children and their lives that we have witnessed in the past few years: starvation in Sudan (and now starvation in Gaza), orphans wandering the streets of Gaza, children fleeing the destruction of Ukraine, just to name a few, I want to cling to a scene of skipping, spinning, dancing children coming down the streets of their ancestors’ towns. Happy-go-lucky children returning to a place they’ve never been, but a place that holds the memory of God’s promise and the hope of God’s future.

*Arise, shine; for your light has come . . . (v. 1).*

May the children come soon into the light of peace, allowing for God’s promise that all those created in God’s image are meant to flourish and thrive.

*Jennifer Copeland  
Executive Director*



# North Carolina Council of Churches

*Strength in Unity, Peace through Justice*

The North Carolina Council of Churches represents 27 distinct judicatories from 19 denominations. We have a proven record of moving ahead of the curve on the social issues of the day even when our position was not popular among the churches or the culture. With each new enterprise, the Council frequently finds itself out in front of where society and the church eventually end up.

While the issues we address mirror the attitude of most progressive organizations around us, we have a singular starting place. We refract everything through the lens of faith, drawing on the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament gospels. This starting place offers a different tenor to the conversation and can lead to different conclusions without reverting to polarizing opposites.

## Members

- African Methodist Episcopal Church
- African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church
- Alliance of Baptists
- General Baptist State Convention
- Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
- Christian Methodist Episcopal Church
- Church of the Brethren
- Episcopal Church
- Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
- Mennonite Church (USA)
- Metropolitan Community Churches
- Moravian Church in America
- Presbyterian Church (USA)
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- Reformed Churches of God in Christ International
- Religious Society of Friends
- United Church of Christ
- United Methodist Church
- Unity Fellowship Church Movement

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