Leading with Love

AN ADVENT REFLECTION BOOKLET



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

AN INTRODUTION

The arc of Advent demands our attention as people who seek strength in unity, pursue peace through justice, and dare to lead with love, not fear. Advent is a sacred season of expectant waiting, brave preparation, and renewed hope as we celebrate Christ's coming and anticipate God's promised restoration for all and in all.

More than invitational, I hope you find these devotions instructional—guiding us through weekly reflections on the incarnational love God extends to all creation. Let's face it: Without intentionality, the liturgical somersaults of Advent can leave us hanging greenery hurriedly, reading lessons and singing carols restlessly, craving fruitcake guiltily, and tapping our toes anxiously while searching for hope in a world proclaiming despair.

This year's theme, **Leading with Love**, calls us beyond seasonal sentiment into courageous discipleship. These devotions are written by faithful leaders serving on the frontlines of justice, confronting fear with courage, and making the sometimes difficult decision to choose love amid uncertainty. If the opposite of love is indifference, then the antidote to fear is courage. Rooted in sacred texts, these offerings reveal God's incarnational presence among vulnerable families, displaced peoples, unwavering obedience, radical hospitality, and courageous witnesses.

Keep this guide close throughout your Advent journey.

Hear Mark's urgency to prepare the way for God's reign. Receive Paul's encouragement to remain steadfast in faith. Listen for Mary's trembling yet courageous voice as she encounters the divine messenger. Join the resounding hymns of praise in the Psalms, where all creation declares God's mighty presence.

May these reflections move us beyond merely awaiting Christ's arrival to embodying Christ's love in a fearful world. May hope embolden us, peace ground us, joy sustain us, and love lead us—this Advent season and always.

Regina H. Moore
Executive Director

FIRST SUNDAY

Mark 13:24-37

These verses from Mark come from a larger piece often referred to as “The Little Apocalypse.” To understand Jesus’ comments, we need to know an apocalypse reveals what we see going on around us using spectacular and provocative language that points to what is actually going on around us that we may not have noticed. In other words, the provocativeness of the darkened sun and moon, stars falling from heaven, and the call to keep watch, breaks through our complacency calling for something other than “business as usual.”

Jesus implores us to “keep alert” (v. 33) and “keep awake” (v. 34 and 37), perhaps not so much to keep ourselves in good standing, but to keep the world around us moving toward God’s righteousness. We must always keep alert for places where the vulnerable are unprotected, where the laborer is cheated, where the hungry are not fed, and the sick are abandoned. Throughout our lives each of us will encounter situations where our own personal intervention can alleviate suffering and if we “pass by on the other side” (Luke 10:31, 32), we certainly are not alert. Shame on us.

More crippling, however, is to allow policies that create harm for the neighbors we are called to love. Because we become inured to the policies surrounding us, we often fall asleep unaware. When we recognize and challenge the regressive policies, we might, understandably, fall asleep from exhaustion. Between the two, the North Carolina Council of Churches strives to refract policies through

the lens of faith, which necessarily calls us to challenge systems. So as not to fall asleep, we must surround ourselves with justice seeking communities, seek time for personal reflection, and even step aside when others need to move out and lead the work.

As I step aside from the amazing work of leading the Council, I implore us all to “keep awake.” Many times, I have said we stand on the shoulders of giants, from 1935 right up to today. I have stood on those former shoulders and I have stood beside the current giants. It has been the honor of a lifetime. And I promise to Keep Awake!

Jennifer Copeland
Former Executive Director

SECOND SUNDAY

Isaiah 40:1-11

This Sunday, we light a candle for peace, and yet our world so deeply lacks it. The prophet Isaiah was no stranger to wilderness times. In our own wilderness, Isaiah's prophetic words point us toward the coming of the Christ child, Emmanuel, God with us. Isaiah reminds us that we do not wait for an escape from the wilderness. Rather, Emmanuel breaks through and meets us there.

We follow a wilderness God, a liberative God. This is where we find peace. Peace is not separate from justice, nor is it simply the absence of conflict. It is a vision of shalom, of a reign of God that redeems all things. As Christmas approaches, we remember that the coming of Christ—God with us—is a miracle: a tangible, human expression of solidarity and hope. In a world marked by violence, fear, and injustice, Christ comes among us, offering glimpses of a different kind of world. A world without gerrymandering, genocide, or the demonizing of our neighbors.

How is the prophet Isaiah inviting you and your community to perceive peace differently this Advent? May Isaiah's words anchor us prophetically to a peace rooted in solidarity, justice, and the promise of God's presence.

Christ is coming. He is coming indeed!

Meredith Rawls

Partners in Health and Wholeness Northeast Regional Coordinator

THIRD SUNDAY

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Advent meets us in the waiting—waiting for peace, waiting for all that is broken to be made whole. In these times, when Christmas seems close, yet peace feels so far away and the brokenness feels so acute, how do we keep our hearts open? How do we lead with love when fear has so much to say?

These verses from Thessalonians offer a few practices to sustain us during this active waiting.

Give thanks in all circumstances. In, not *for*. There is a difference. We do not have to be thankful for suffering or pretend that what hurts is good. But even amid brokenness, we can practice noticing: someone who checks on us, a moment of laughter, a warm cup held in tired hands. Giving thanks trains our eyes to recognize the goodness that remains. Sometimes, when life feels heaviest, this practice matters most. In what circumstances will you give thanks this week?

Pray without ceasing. Perhaps this is an invitation to keep breathing. Breathing in God's love, breathing out what we cannot carry alone. We do not need words to be present with God. Sometimes in the holiday seasons there can be pressure to be and do more. What if your faithfulness was simply in the connection to your breath?

Test everything; hold fast to what is good. Test even the stories we tell ourselves. "I feel afraid" can quietly become

“I am in danger” before we have paused to ask whether that is true. Our feelings deserve tenderness, but they do not tell the whole story. We can listen to our fear and still ask: What else is true? Where is love at work? In that pause, we make room for love to guide our response.

The work of making us whole does not rest on our shoulders alone. So we wait. We notice. We breathe. We hold fast to what is good—and we practice letting love guide our next step.

Faithful God, meet us in our waiting. Open our eyes to goodness, receive our breath as prayer, and help us choose love when we are afraid. Amen.

Carrilea Hall
Partners in Health and Wholeness Senior Director

FOURTH SUNDAY

Luke 1:26-38

"He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly;" - Luke 1:52

A burgundy Velcro wallet with a faint white picture of Michael Jackson's "Thriller" album cover remains one of my prized possessions. I believe I received it during a holiday party at Mary Ford Elementary School. While a classroom Christmas gift exchange may seem innocent, my 9-year-old mind couldn't understand why some of my classmates couldn't participate. "I guess his mama didn't have time to buy a gift." I grew up attending a Title 1 elementary school in South Carolina and didn't understand what that designation meant until I became an adult.

For families living in poverty, life circumstances don't always reflect "tidings of comfort and joy." Even adults with the best intentions may not realize how these activities reveal a reality for some children that parents try to shield from them all year long. Instead of experiencing the joy of the season, many of our neighbors, like my classmates, have to sit this one out. But when we look past Christmas's commercialism, we are reminded that this is not a time for those without to feel excluded. The baby in Mary's womb is coming to change the course for the children whose schools lack resources and whose families work hard yet struggle to make ends meet.

Even amid our current circumstances, may we all remember that love leads and help is on the way!

Arlecia Simmons
Partners in Health and Wholeness Associate Director

CHRISTMAS DAY

John 1:1-14

Think about the absolute marvel of the Incarnation Event we celebrate on Christmas. When Jesus is born, God becomes human! The God of power and glory becomes one of us, to reveal, in the most intimate way, an unconditional abiding love for us.

At Christmas, perhaps more than any other time of year, something comes to life deep within us and gives us light — not in the form of easy answers to our anxious questions about evil and suffering and death; no, those questions remain. Something gives us light in the form of an infant, born in a stable, in a town called Bethlehem. The infant grows into a teacher guiding us with expert authority on one subject: God Is Love.

This teaching is not meant to be an optimistic motto. It's not meant to be a pious slogan. It's meant to be the guiding light toward the fullness of all life has to offer. It's meant to be the supreme expression of the reality that the power which holds the stars in their places, the power that controls the rise and ebb of tides, the power numbering the grains of sand on the planet, the origin of that power is Love: God Is Love.

As you gaze into the manger and ponder the mystery of God becoming an infant to model and guide you on the path of love, consider your own willingness to follow our teacher down this path. Will you stoop down and consider the needs and the desires of the least among you? Will we remember the weakness and loneliness of

people who are cast to the margins of our world by those in power? Will you speak up for those who have lost their voice, have no voice, or fear making a sound? Will you believe love is the strongest thing in the world – stronger than hate, stronger than evil, stronger than death – and that the fulness of life made flesh in Bethlehem is the image brightness of Eternal Love leading us today? Will you follow the example of Christ and lead with love? Amen.

Sean Allen
Finance and Administration Director

FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

Psalm 148

"God has raised up a horn for God's people, praise for all God's faithful servants." — Psalm 148:14 (NRSV)

The Benito Gonzalez, Lenny White, and Buster Williams Trio is an electrifying collaboration of three internationally acclaimed jazz musicians. Experiencing their artistry leaves one marveling at their passion and skill as they navigate the delicate balance between disciplined precision and spontaneous improvisation.

Benito dances across the piano keys, bouncing joyfully on his bench. Buster's entire body courts the bass, his seasoned octogenarian fingers in constant motion and his hooded eyes seemingly entranced. Lenny marches across the snare drums, fearlessly establishing grooves that invite both movement and applause.

Three musicians. Distinct instruments. One extraordinary sound.

Psalm 148 offers a similarly magnificent syncopation of praise. From the highest heavens to the deepest seas. From celestial bodies to creeping creatures. In this comprehensive hymn of praise, all creation receives the invitation to praise God in manifold witness. Each contributes a distinctive voice to the grand composition of God's glory.

And, then comes the crescendo: God "has raised up a horn for God's people" (v. 14). This horn of salvific

strength makes more room for love than fear. The God who creates is also the God who redeems, drawing near to God's beloved people.

On this first Sunday after Christmas, we celebrate the divine improvisation of grace: God enters human history through a vulnerable child, transforming our understanding of power, proximity, peace, and praise.

The Christ child is here! Hope has been born. Love has arrived. Justice reigns. Fear need not take the stage. May we lead with love and join in creation's joy to the world with adoration: Praise the Lord!

Regina Henderson Moore
Executive Director

EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14

"All kings will fall down and worship..." - Psalm 72:11

Today's Psalm is a royal prayer asking God to grant the ruler divine justice and righteousness so the ruler can care for the poor and vulnerable. The ruler asks God for wisdom to rule with divine justice and righteousness - defend the afflicted, rescue the needy, and stop oppressors. This type of rule is compared to refreshing rain on cut grass, bringing lasting peace and prosperity. Other nations and rulers bring gifts and bow before this righteous ruler, rendering tribute because this ruler delivers the needy and shows mercy, earning respect through social equity rather than fear. The lives of the weak are valued, and they are saved from violence and harm. The leader acts as a channel for God's character rather than ruling by personal whim. The core of this message is a shift in perspective: true power is not measured by whom a ruler crushes, but by whom a ruler lifts up.

No matter how unseen, unvalued, or oppressed someone feels by society, this text guarantees their absolute, high-value worth in the eyes of God. Our pain and our lives matter intimately to the Creator. If we are the body of Christ on earth today, then we are the answers to the prayers of Psalm 72. We cannot bring rain to the whole world, but whose "cut grass" can we water this week? How can we prove to the vulnerable in our community that their lives are precious to God?

God of hope,
as we gather in praise,
we remember the many needs of your church and the world.

Guide us on the path of righteousness and salvation, O God, that the power of your Holy Spirit working in the world will gather together all of your people and nations in one community. Amen.

Donna Parks Hill
Partners in Health and Wholeness Associate 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)
- Reformed Church in America
- Reformed Churches of God in Christ International
- Religious Society of Friends
- United Church of Christ
- United Methodist Church
- Unity Fellowship Church Movement

Follow Us!

NorthCarolinaCouncilofChurches

ncchurches

A publication of
The North Carolina Council of Churches
27 Horne Street Raleigh, NC 27607
919-828-6501 | info@ncchurches.org
ncchurches.org