



The Light Shines in the Darkness

JOHN 1:5

MOUNT OLIVET
ADVENT & CHRISTMAS
2025 DEVOTIONAL



INTRODUCTION TO THE ADVENT DEVOTIONS

You'll notice very quickly that John tells a very different "Christmas story" than Luke and Matthew. For starters, there's no baby Jesus. And no Mary and Joseph. There's not even a manger. And no shepherds or cute barn animals either.

How then, you may be wondering, can we even call the first 18 verses of John a "Christmas story" at all? Truth be told, these verses aren't often called that. Rather, they are called the "Prologue," which literally means, "words that come before." So John 1:1-18 is essentially the introduction to the rest of John's Gospel.

But having noted that John doesn't offer a traditional "Christmas story," the church has nonetheless read these verses during Advent and on Christmas Day for centuries. Why? Because in these few verses we have the clearest statement of what we call "the Incarnation," the promise that, in Jesus, the eternal and Almighty God took on flesh and blood to become human. The first verse gets it going: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." And the 14th verse brings it home: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

So while John doesn't describe the Incarnation with a baby, adoring parents, manger, shepherds and more – he does testify to why it matters – because in the baby Jesus, God took on our lot and life that we might live with courage, compassion, and hope! And that's what I call one very important Christmas story.

– P A S T O R L O S E

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First Sunday of Advent

NOVEMBER 30, 2025

WORSHIP:

MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM

WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

SCRIPTURE:

JOHN 1:1-5

“IN THE BEGINNING”

PRAYER OF THE DAY:

Dear God, each day is a new wonder and new creation. Anchored by your promises of grace, forgiveness, and calling, let us be ready today to make a difference in the world you love. In Jesus' name, Amen.



MONDAY, DECEMBER 1, 2025

In the beginning...

JOHN 1:1A

Sound familiar? It should. These three words are how the whole of the Bible starts: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” John’s decision to start his story about Jesus with the same three words – “In the beginning was the Word” – is both audacious and revealing.

Audacious because it imitates perhaps the best-known opening in all of literature. It would be kind of like if I decided I wanted to write my first novel and started, “It was the best of times. It was the worst of times.” And just as you might say to me, “Who do you think you are, the next Dickens?”, early readers of John might have posed a similar question to him: “Who do you think you are, the author of Genesis?” And to that question, John would answer simply and confidently, “Yes!”

Revealing because John will draw from the imagery of Genesis at several key points throughout his story. Here, in borrowing the same three words with which Genesis starts. Further along in John’s story, he speaks of an unnamed garden where Jesus surrenders himself to the authorities knowing it will lead to his crucifixion. And finally, in the story of Easter morning, John locates Jesus’ tomb in another garden. From John’s point of view, you see, history is repeating itself. But this time things go as God desires. Jesus trusts God in the garden rather than taking matters into his own hands, as Adam and Eve did, and resurrection – new life, new birth, re-creation – happens once again in a garden.

And so with these three words, John confesses that, yes, he is writing the next Genesis, and he believes it complements and completes the first one. For if Genesis tells the story of God’s creation, John is sharing the story of God’s re-creation. If Genesis tells the story of humanity’s fall, John tells of its redemption. And if Genesis tries to tell us where we came from, John is telling us where we’re going. All with just those three words. Just imagine what comes next!

—PASTOR LOSE

Dear God, as we read John, fill us with wonder at your refusal to give up on your creation and decision to re-create and redeem us through your Son. In Jesus’ name, Amen.



T U E S D A Y , D E C E M B E R 2 , 2 0 2 5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

J O H N 1:1

John makes three very important and distinct claims about who Jesus is to begin his Gospel. These will shape how we read the rest of the story.

First. Jesus' lineage doesn't just go back to Joseph and Mary, or even Moses or Abraham, but to the very beginning of time. Jesus has been from the very beginning, when God breathed creation into life. Jesus, the Word, is eternal, meaning the flesh and blood body that comes to be with us is eternal, too.

Second. Jesus was in relationship with God the Father. Relationship is a key theme throughout the Gospel of John. Jesus continually offers disciples, followers, and people on the way a relationship with their God, and an intimacy and closeness with the Living God that had not previously been possible. This relationship that they—and now we—have with God is because of another relationship, one that precedes all other relationships: the relationship Jesus has with God.

And third. Jesus was God. Jesus was separate from God, but also God's very self. John wants us to trust and believe that when Jesus walks among us, we can know that it's God. We can know that it is the embodiment of the God who created us, who gave us breath, who desires to be with us.

These are not small claims John is making. He's being incredibly bold before we know anything about who this Jesus is. But to John, everything falls apart if these things aren't true. This is the crux of it all, and he's laying it out for us in the very first sentence.

My less eloquent summary of John's first line is this: From the very beginning of time, there was the Word—a divine community and sharing of love. This is the essence of who Jesus is, and what his coming into the world makes possible: our eternal life and relationship with God.

—PASTOR OLSON POPP

God, your Word is beyond our comprehension. Though it is hard to grasp the vastness of your Son and what He made possible for us, we thank you for the incredible gift of your Word that invites us into deeper relationship with you. Amen.



W E D N E S D A Y , D E C E M B E R 3 , 2 0 2 5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

He was in the beginning with God.

JOHN 1:1-2

These words are so obviously weighty, so obviously meaningful. And yet, it's hard to understand exactly what they mean. The Word was with God in the beginning, and also the Word was God, and also the Word is a "He"? This "Word" is obviously pretty important, but what exactly is it? The standard Sunday school answer helps us cut through much of this strangeness—"it's Jesus!"—but I still wonder...so what? What do these verses mean? Why are they important? What does it add to our understanding of Jesus to think of him as this mysterious Word?

We'll come back to that last question, but first I'd like to bring in another verse from later in John's first chapter. I know this is cheating! I know all the verses have been carefully assigned for this devotional project, but these two audacious, epic verses with which John opens his Gospel just don't land for me without the context of verse 14: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us."

Verse 14 puts into human, fleshy, familiar perspective the strangeness of the Word that Has Always Been. Now that Word becomes human, and comes to live as one of us, with us in our reality. But why? Why would this mysterious something or someone come to us from beyond time, space, and understanding, and take on our frail human form? There must be a pretty urgent reason. We must have needed divine intervention pretty badly.

And this is why John's first two verses are important. In our great need, it's not just some charismatic, spiritual dude who comes to us. It's The Word. It is The Word God spoke, which poured forth God's own light, and love, and life until this world took shape. As this world seems to teeter on the edge of chaos and darkness, it is no small comfort to hear again that this is who Jesus is, was, and always will be from before the beginning until after the end.

— P A S T O R D I X O N

God, comfort us with the truth that your Son is not only a teacher, not only a king, not even just a savior, but the very Word that brought forth our life. Amen.



THURSDAY, DECEMBER 4, 2025

All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.

JOHN 1:3a

As we've seen so far, John's Gospel opens not with a manger, but with majesty: Christ as the Word through whom all things were made. Galaxies, oceans, atoms—all exist because of the animating Word of God.

Yet the radical claim that this Gospel in particular makes is that this cosmic Creator chose to be intimately present in the person of Jesus. The One who holds all things together entered into the fragility of human life. God did not remain distant, but came near—born into poverty, vulnerability, and obscurity.

This is the stunningly beautiful scandal of Christmas. The One who made the stars lay beneath them. The One who formed humanity took on human form. Christ's presence is not abstract or aloof; it is personal and accessible. In Jesus, God is not only with us—Christ is one of us.

Advent invites us to hold this paradox close: Christ is both the Creator of all and the companion to each one of us. He is present in the grandeur of creation and in the joyful and painful moments of our lives. As we light candles and sing carols, may we remember that the One who made all things has come to dwell among us—not in power but in love.

Let us prepare room in our hearts for this mystery: the Word made flesh, full of grace and truth.

—PASTOR CIESLIK

Lord Jesus, who helped fashion this world, remake our hearts in your image, so that we can join you in renewing this world. In your name we pray. Amen.



F R I D A Y , D E C E M B E R 5 , 2 0 2 5

What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

J O H N 1 : 3 B - 4

Drawing from the creation account in Genesis 1, the Gospel of John proclaims that light is a prerequisite for all of life. In Genesis, as darkness covered the earth, God said, “Let there be light,” and it was so.

In the Gospel of John, rather than write a traditional birth narrative about Jesus, he writes a “new Genesis” which proclaims Jesus as the light and life of the world. Yet, darkness and fear often cause us to forget this central truth. God’s life and God’s light go hand in hand. And we are invited to recognize it in all we are and in all we do.

Years ago, I learned a prayer practice called the *examen* which helps me to discern God’s light and life every day. I like to light a candle, acknowledge the stillness of God, and ask myself some simple questions that help me to acknowledge moments of consolation and desolation in my day.

To notice moments of consolation, I ask myself, “What part of this day was most life-giving? When did I feel most content or most like myself? When did I sense God’s presence most fully today?”

To notice moments of desolation, I ask myself, “What drained life from me today? When did I feel least content or least like myself? When did God seem least present in my life today?”

When I acknowledge these moments of consolation and desolation, I notice God’s active, living, creative presence and trust that God’s promise of hope and life is sure.

In this world, we will always have darkness and death. But the Gospel of John reminds us that God’s life and God’s light in Jesus are too strong for darkness and death to prevail. The Gospel of John proclaims that light is a prerequisite for all of life. Where there is light and life, there is God.

— P A S T O R F R E E M A N

Dear God, your light brings us life. Help us to notice your light and share abundant life with one another. Amen.



S A T U R D A Y , D E C E M B E R 6 , 2 0 2 5

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

J O H N 1 : 5

One of the greatest joys of being a pastor is being invited to baptize a little one. While parents gaze upon the precious bundle wrapped in their arms, with so much love and hope and faith, we light a candle in prayer and whisper in the newborn's ear, "Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven."

Letting our God-given light shine can feel as easy as breathing on some days, and on others, well, not so much. There are days when the weight of the cruelty in our world makes getting out of bed feel like attempting to escape quicksand! On those days, just showing up is tough enough, let alone being beacons of God's light and love.

This fall Pastor Freeman and I accompanied a group of 25 women from Mount Olivet to hike a path well-worn by generations of spiritual pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago, through the Spanish countryside to the Cathedral of Santiago, the final resting place of one of Jesus' disciples, St. James. We were aware that, traveling as a large group of women, we were representing both our church and our country to the thousands of people from all over the world with whom we walked, and were determined to be as kind and generous in spirit as God had in mind in our baptismal prayer.

The Camino turned out to be filled with God's Light—more so than most any experience of our lives! You know how tangible God's presence is in the chapel at Cathedral of the Pines? Like that! But in multiple languages!

We could feel the Holy Spirit among the pilgrims. Pilgrims from all over the world were sharing their lives and stories and faith with one another. We shared encouragement on the inclines, and water and Band-Aids and life stories on the level places. People helping people. Strangers united in faith. Letting our lights shine brightly together, just as God intended. It felt a lot like how I imagine heaven to be.

— P A S T O R H A M M E R S T E N

Dear Lord, we are so very blessed to be your children! Help us, even on storm-filled days, to let your light so shine before others, that they may see our good works, and glorify you in Heaven. Amen.



Second Sunday of Advent

DECEMBER 7, 2025

WORSHIP:

MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM
WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

SCRIPTURE:

JOHN 1:6-9, 19-23
“JOHN THE BAPTIST”

PRAYER OF THE DAY:

Dear God, just as you called John to give witness to the light and life offered by your Son, so you also call us to testify to the grace we have experienced in him. Continue to guide us to grow in faith, hope, and love.

In Jesus' name, Amen.



MONDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2025

*There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.
He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.*

JOHN 1:6-7

One of my favorite pieces of religious art is The Crucifixion by Matthias Grünewald. Placed in the center of an enormous movable altar originally located in a hospital, the painting depicts Jesus' death on the cross. His body is gaunt, his suffering immense. Surrounding him are his mother Mary, collapsing in grief and held by the beloved disciple John; Mary Magdalene, mourning and praying at the foot of the cross; and John the Baptist, standing to the side, pointing toward Jesus with a long, outstretched finger.

You might wonder, "What is John the Baptist doing at the crucifixion? He died long before Jesus!" For Grünewald, the point is theological, not historical, and it flows from the opening verses of John's Gospel. Unlike the nativity stories of Matthew and Luke, John's Gospel portrays John the Baptist not as a baby leaping in Elizabeth's womb but as a witness—one who testifies to the Light. He points away from himself toward the One sent to save, heal, and set us free.

To be a disciple of Jesus is to be a witness, and to be a witness is to point toward the Light and live in its radiance. We do this whenever we embody God's love in concrete ways: when we visit the sick, feed the hungry, welcome strangers, and stand alongside those whose dignity is denied.

I think of those who witness to the Light today: health care workers who tend the wounded with compassion; community organizers who labor for justice with grace; and Hispanic immigrants who, amid threats and prejudice, worship God, care for their families, and refuse to let hate take root in their hearts. Their lives, like John's long finger in Grünewald's painting, point us toward the Light that still shines—undimmed, unbroken, and full of grace and truth.

How are you pointing toward the Light of Jesus this Advent season? Who is pointing you toward that Light?

—D R . L A T I N I

Light of the world, shine on our path, wherever it may take us. Give us courage to point toward your love and truth, so that through our lives, others may see and know Jesus. Amen.



T U E S D A Y , D E C E M B E R 9 , 2 0 2 5

He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

JOHN 1:8

Not everyone listened to John the Baptist.

Some people listened and followed John when he shared his testimony of the light. Others chose not to believe. Rather, they chose to stand outside. To mock. To criticize. To point and laugh. To them, John appeared crazy.

With good reason.

You've heard the description: John was a wild man. His clothes were made out of camel's hair, held together by a leather belt around his waist. He subsisted off of locusts and wild honey. He was a wild man who lived in a wild place. And had wild thoughts about light breaking the darkness, about a lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world, and how God's kingdom was at hand – particularly when the kingdom of Rome flexed and flourished.

The people did not know what to do with his wildness. They could not believe his words.

That did not deter John or his witness of the light. No matter what others thought or believed, John clung to the true light that was coming into the world: Jesus Christ.

Jesus' birth is heralded by the angels, an unlikely way for God to save the world. Jesus' ministry was heralded by his cousin, an unlikely witness to the power of God in and for the world. That's how God works, again and again, calling surprising people to share his surprising news. God made us. God loves us. God wants to be with us.

Some listen and follow. Some still find it hard to believe. God will continue to send messengers to witness to the light. And God in Christ Jesus will be the light.

Wherever we are, wherever we stand, whoever we listen to, may we point not to ourselves and our own understanding but to Christ, the light of the world, who has come to be a light in the midst of the darkness, to save the world, to give us life and light and truth and grace.

— P A S T O R G R A N G A A R D

Dear God, when we sit in darkness, be our light. Thank you for sending witnesses of your light and love. Help us to listen, follow, and trust that you are for us and the world you so love. Amen.



WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2025

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

JOHN 1:9

What does “enlighten” mean here? Does the author of John’s Gospel want us to think that Jesus (the Word, the true light) coming into the world will enlighten everyone, in the sense that he will make everyone understand something? That is undoubtedly how many Christians would read this text. This is because for so much of the Christian church, faith and understanding are synonymous. Faith means “getting it,” believing correctly, knowing the answer, and being unwaveringly certain of that knowledge. But if we look through the Gospels and see the effect Jesus had on people, it’s not so simple.

Certainly many characters come to understand the truth that Jesus is the Messiah after encountering him, but many more characters (including his closest followers) persist in confusion and doubt even after the resurrection! Not everyone “gets it.”

Enlightenment might mean something else in this case—illumination. Jesus Christ enters into this world and brings a light that doesn’t just illuminate the darkness, it illuminates us. The light that is in Jesus, the light that is Jesus now burns in us, and the darkness cannot overcome us. In fact our lights now might shine, too, piercing the darkness and reflecting something of God’s goodness and mercy.

Light and life are often paired together in prayerful speech about Jesus, and the connection makes sense in this case. Christ’s light enlightens us, and Christ’s life enlivens us. Christ makes us more alive. Indeed his life, his grace now lives in us.

What are we to do with this inextinguishable light and inexhaustible supply of grace? Share it of course. Let your light shine so that others might see more clearly. Live your life for others so that they, too, might have more abundant life. The true light has come into the world. It has come into us. We cannot hide it!

—PASTOR DIXON

Dear God, may we be enlightened and enlivened this Advent season so that your glory might shine all the more brightly in this world. Amen.



THURSDAY, DECEMBER 11, 2025

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.

JOHN 1:10

This is one of the more shocking verses in the Prologue. It is striking to imagine the Creator of the world entering into that creation and being ignored, unrecognized, and unknown. How could we be so aloof to not know the very Breath that gave us life and all the world? What is it that keeps us from noticing, accepting, believing, and trusting that the Living God, the Word in flesh, Jesus, is here?

The short answer? Sin.

The long answer? We are bound to that which does not give life, to all that separates us from God, and to the darkness that surrounds us. We are drawn to it in a way that is incomprehensible to ourselves. This is why we confess it every Sunday in worship. Because of this tendency, we are kept from seeing the Light that is the life of all the world. Throughout John's Gospel, we will read lots of stories of people who also didn't recognize Jesus, even when he was standing right in front of them! We're not alone in this faulty wiring.

The good news is that our inability to know and recognize Jesus does not stop God from showing up. Rather, it makes God that much more relentless. God gives us another chance, redeems all that has kept us from recognizing God, and showers us with radically abundant love and grace. Jesus does this, no matter whether we know him or not, whether we see him or not. It is this gift of unimaginable grace that loosens us from the bonds of sin and sets us free to find the Light of the world in the most unlikely of places.

—PASTOR OLSON POPP

God, you have created us and all of life that surrounds us, and you have come to be close to us, though we don't recognize you. Open our eyes to the ways you are acting in our world, redeeming what is broken, finding what is lost, illuminating what is dim, and bringing all the world—a world that struggles to know you—into your loving arms. Amen.



F R I D A Y , D E C E M B E R 1 2 , 2 0 2 5

He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.

J O H N 1 : 1 1

Things take a bit of a dark turn as John's Gospel reminds us of a painful truth: Jesus came to his own, and they did not accept him.

This rejection is deeply personal. Jesus came to the people he created, the ones he loved, the ones he called his own. And they turned away.

Perhaps the answer lies not only in their disbelief but in something more intimate: their inability to believe that Jesus could possibly be for them.

We often wrestle with the same doubt. We hear the message of God's love, but something inside us resists. We wonder, "Could this really be for me?" We know our flaws, our failures, our fears. We carry shame and regret. And so we struggle to accept Jesus—not because he is unworthy, but because we feel unworthy.

This Advent, I hope you hear a different story. One that tells us that Jesus came anyway. He came knowing he would be rejected. He came knowing we would struggle to believe. And still, he comes—for you, for me, for all.

Jesus didn't come for the perfect. He came for the broken, the doubting, the weary. He came for those who struggle to believe they could be loved.

—P A S T O R C I E S L I K

Lord Jesus, help us to trust in your boundless love for us. Help us to know and believe that it is precisely for us that you have come and promise to come again. Amen.



SATURDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2025

But to all who received him...

JOHN 1:12A

“But” is a contrary conjunction. It announces a change in direction, sometimes even a contradiction. And John’s use of it here is no exception. As with this contrary conjunction, John announces a swing from bad news to good, from conflict to resolution, from hopelessness to triumph, and from fear to courage.

One of the interesting things about stories is that they almost always get started by some level of conflict. That is, stories have their genesis in a problem to be solved, an obstacle to be overcome, or a challenge to be met. And this one is no different. John has just identified the problem: the Word that is with God and is God and created all things comes into the world to shine light and give life. But the world, too preoccupied with its own distractions and captivated by pretenders, neither recognizes nor receives the Word of light and life. That’s the conflict, the challenge, the problem that drives this story.

If there was no way to overcome this challenge, this story would be a tragedy. But all is not lost. All is not hopeless. The rejection of the light is not the last word. And all of this is signaled by the powerful and contrary conjunction, “but.”

Yes, there is darkness, but...

Yes, the world did not recognize him, but...

Yes, even his own people did not receive him, but...

“But to all who did receive him....”

This story is not over. It will not end in tragedy. Conflict and challenge, rejection and darkness do not rule the day. All of this and more is announced and anticipated in this brief phrase, a few words that indicate there is much to come.

—PASTOR LOSE

*Dear God, thank you for never giving up on us and the creation...ever.
In Jesus' name, Amen.*



Third Sunday of Advent

DECEMBER 14, 2025

WORSHIP:

MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM
WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

SCRIPTURE:

JOHN 1:10-14
“*CHILDREN ON GOD*”

PRAYER OF THE DAY:

Dear God, you have made us to be your children. When we sometimes stray and treat ourselves and others as less than your treasured possessions, forgive us, remind us of your love, and help us to see and treat those around us as deserving of dignity. In Jesus' name, Amen.



MONDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2025

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.

JOHN 1:12

Have you ever thought of yourself as a child of God? You are precious in His sight. Even before you were born God was loving you. You, yes, you.

Psalm 139 says that “the Lord knit you together in your mother’s womb; you are fearfully and wonderfully made.” Before we had anything to do with it, God was loving us up. The Gospel message of Christ’s love, sacrifice and resurrection announces that forgiveness precedes repentance. We are loved and accepted before we plead for mercy. It’s already granted. Total amnesty, gratuitous pardon.

We even receive this phrase every Sunday as part of our worship following confession. The phrase “become children of God” is proclaimed to us as part of the absolution of our confessed sins. God gave us authority to be called children of God through His own will. We are allowed to become children of God, not through anything that we can do for ourselves, but through Jesus and what He has done, and what He continues to do for us each day.

Christ Jesus is Lord forever.

You are a child of God and Christ was born for you.

— PASTOR KALLAND

Dear Lord, at times it's hard to believe that we are your children. We are so grateful that you constantly walk with us.

Your love is overwhelming at times. Help us to carry the message of your love with grace.



T U E S D A Y , D E C E M B E R 1 6 , 2 0 2 5

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

JOHN 1:12-13

John's Gospel reminds us that receiving Jesus is not just a moment or moments of cognitive belief, but a transformation of identity. To those who believe in Jesus, who trust in Jesus, God gives the power to become children of God.

This identity is not earned, inherited, or achieved. It is a gift—born of God. And with it comes a new kind of freedom.

As children of God, we are freed from the exhausting pursuit of self-fulfillment. We no longer need to chase after what we think will make us whole, successful, or secure. Instead, we are made whole as a free gift. We're invited to live with a deeper purpose: to love as we have been loved, to seek the good of our neighbor, and to participate in the flourishing of creation.

This freedom is not passive—it is active and transformative. It shifts our focus from self to service, from scarcity to abundance, from fear to hope. In Christ, we are no longer defined by our limitations, but by God's limitless grace.

To receive Jesus is to receive the power to live differently—to embody the love of God in a world that desperately needs it. And as we do, we become part of God's healing work, allowing the whole of creation to thrive.

—PASTOR CIESLIK

Lord Jesus, help us to recognize and rest in the truth that we are and forever will be your children. Embolden us to live that way in this world, so that all may know of your life and your love. Amen.



WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2025

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

JOHN 1:12-13

Children of God. It hits me every time.

Each Sunday morning when we confess these words together as a congregation, a lump rises in my throat.

Children of God! Born of God! Wow! All of us, those gathered here on Sunday morning, and those gathered all around the world, are all God's children. What comfort! What joy! Powered by the Holy Spirit, this Word of God also begs the question: Are we treating all people as beloved children of God?

Like many of you, Tom and I love our nieces and nephews and friends' children like they were our own. We've watched them grow from fuzzy black and white ultrasound photos into adults we now call friends. We've held them as babies, baptized them as infants, changed their diapers, celebrated over birthday cakes, and cheered them on in games and concerts and life. We prayed for them when their waters were rough and cried tears of joy when the sun came out again. Have you ever noticed who dances with the most joy at most any wedding? The mother-of-the-bride's friends and the aunties! We've shared a lifetime of celebrating our communal children's successes and grieving with them in their sorrows. We are connected at the heart—born out of our love for their parents!

Do we love God? Yes! Does knowing that we are all God's children soften our hearts towards those we dismiss as less than?

"The third time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, 'Do you love me?' Simon said, 'Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.' Jesus said, 'Feed my sheep'" (John 21:17).

—PASTOR HAMMERTON

Dear Lord, this Christmas season, when we find ourselves judging others, deciding who is deserving of love and grace and a place in our society, remind us that we are all children of God, your children, born of God. Help us to treat all of humanity with the same love and care that we so freely give to our nearest and dearest. Amen.



THURSDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2025

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

JOHN 1:14

John's first chapter is flush with beautiful and elegant language. Today's verse is a crescendo, a growing point of intensity from which John's Gospel sings loudest and clearest. Jesus is God's act of communication and creation. Jesus will show us God's glory. The Word that brought all things into being...became flesh.

Not what you were expecting. Not what anyone was expecting.

It is worth noting that flesh, in the Bible, is a four-letter swear word. The Greek – sarx – shows up almost 150 times in the New Testament, and it is almost always cast in a negative light.

We humans don't quite know what to do with the stuff that makes us and holds our bodies. How hard is it to read these lines from Mary Oliver's poem Wild Geese:

“...let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.”

Flesh is vulnerable. Flesh makes us uncomfortable. We hide it. Shape it. Judge it. Will it to be different. Pretend it isn't there. And at the same time, wish that we could hold it forever.

The crescendo of John's first chapter sweeps us into the beautiful promise that God chose for God's Word to become...flesh...and to dwell with us in Jesus. Or as one translation puts it: “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood” (John 1:14, The Message). God chose what we so often reject. God blesses what we so often condemn.

Our flesh matters so much that God in Christ Jesus came and put it on. With us. For us.

Indeed, God in Christ Jesus has come for all of us: the parts we love and the parts we hide. The pieces we share and all that we withhold. That is God's glory, a glory that will go all the way to the cross, all the way into death, in order to bring us, all of us, into his life.

— PASTOR GRANGAARD

Dear God, help us behold you, full of grace and truth, in the flesh. Dwell with us where we are. Give us faith to trust that you love all of us and the whole world that you have made. Amen.



F R I D A Y , D E C E M B E R 1 9 , 2 0 2 5

(John testified to him and cried out, “this was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’”)

JOHN 1:15

There are no parentheses in Koine Greek, the language in which the Gospel of John was originally written. These were added by later translators and editors to make clear that this line is an interruption. When you read today's passage with the surrounding verses, you'll find that the parenthetical comment in verse 15 doesn't only interrupt a narrative arc but also (and more jarringly) the poetic flow of the text.

To me, this verse is like a moment we've all experienced when watching a movie with someone who has already seen and loved it. You're engrossed in the film when suddenly your friend exclaims, "Wait! Watch this! This is my favorite part!" (It's me, by the way. I'm the friend. I am heinously and serially guilty of this practice—just ask my wife.) Of course, you were already watching. If anything, your friend has disrupted your viewing, distracted you, and possibly caused you to miss the crucial/funny/beautiful moment they so badly wanted you to see.

This might be what the verse is like, but it's not what John is like. John is pointing to Jesus, and that is always a good thing. We talk about the miracles Jesus performed as "signs," because the most important thing about them was not whatever miraculous thing was accomplished, but how that miraculous thing pointed (the way signs do) to Jesus as in fact really and truly the son of God. A healing, water becoming wine, even a resurrection? These were all flashing neon signs pointing at Jesus, announcing he (or rather He) is right here.

So when something or someone interrupts the regular flow of your daily life to point you towards the grace of Jesus, perhaps we can think of that as a sign, or even a miracle.

— P A S T O R D I X O N

God help us to be grateful not only for your son, Jesus Christ, but for all those who point him out to us. Amen.



SATURDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2025

From his fulness we have all received, grace upon grace.

JOHN 1:16

Is God's grace for "all"? It says "all" in the scripture reading for today. But isn't there something we have to do before we receive grace? It's easy to fall back into the temptation of having to earn God's love. We think, "If I just do enough spiritual gymnastics, give enough money, volunteer more, then I'll be good enough." The gospel of grace is not for the super-spiritual. Many Christians mistakenly think the emphasis is on what we do rather than on what God is doing.

I like how John starts out with the 16th verse: grace. It's all about grace. It's been said grace is "unmerited favor." At times it doesn't make sense; it's scandalous, it's unfair. We have a God who loves sinners. The father of Jesus loves all. This is almost too incredible for us to accept. Grace upon grace. Through no merit of ours, but by His mercy, we have been restored to a right relationship with God through the life, death, and resurrection of his beloved Son.

Fyodor Dostoevsky caught the shock and the scandal of the gospel of grace when he wrote, "At the last judgement Christ will say to us, 'Come, you also! Come drunkards! Come, weaklings! Come, children of shame!' And he will say to us: 'Vile beings, you who are in the image of the beast and bear his mark, but come all the same, you as well.' And the wise and the prudent will say, 'Lord, why do you welcome them?' And he will say: 'If I welcome them, you wise men, if I welcome them, you prudent men, it is because not one of them has ever been judged worthy.' And he will stretch out his arms, and we will fall at his feet, and we will cry out sobbing, and then we will understand all, we will understand the Gospel of grace! Lord, your Kingdom come!"

God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Christ was born for you.

— PASTOR KALLAND

Dear Lord, thank you for your constant presence in our lives. Your love and grace for us, your amazing grace that saves. Help us to reach out in love and grace to others. There sure is plenty going on in the world we just don't understand. As it says in 1 Corinthians 13, "we see through a mirror dimly." Help us in the midst of things we cannot understand to trust and believe in the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, and the promise of the resurrection to eternal life.



Fourth Sunday of Advent & Christmas Communion

DECEMBER 21, 2025

WORSHIP:

MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM

WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

SCRIPTURE:

JOHN 1:14-18

“THE WORD BECAME FLESH”

PRAYER OF THE DAY:

Dear God, you come to us in the bread and wine of communion, in the song and Scripture of worship, and in the love of those around us. Encourage us by these things and send us out to share your love with others.

In Jesus' name, Amen.



MONDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2025

The law indeed was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

JOHN 1:17

It's important not to read this verse as a dichotomy. John does not see this as a competition between Moses and Jesus, nor is he implying that the law is bad in contrast to grace and truth.

Rather, John is connecting Jesus to the story of the Israelites, to the gift of the law that was given by God to God's people all the way back in Exodus. John wants us to know that this is the same story and the same God. The God who gave us the gift of the law through Moses is also the God who gives us the gifts of grace and truth through Jesus Christ.

Though this is the same story, God is doing something entirely new through Jesus. Jesus is not a stone tablet of laws or a tabernacle—ways God has spoken to and shown up for God's people in the past. Instead, Jesus is human. Through Jesus, God has made the invisible, visible. God has made the distant, close. God has risked everything so that we might be in relationship with God, so that we may receive the fullness of grace, truth, and eternal life with God. God has never done this before!

John 1:16-17 is the only time in the entire Gospel that John uses the word “grace.” Nowhere else does he pen this term. Instead, John chooses to tell us stories of people meeting the Living God which he believes is the only way we understand grace—by encountering the embodied God in our midst and receiving unimaginable love. John is a show, not tell, kind of guy. And the Jesus we meet in John seems to be a show, not tell, kind of God.

This is how we know what grace is—through our own encounter with Jesus. It's not a law or an idea. It's the Living God who desires to be close with us and offers us the gift of eternal life, here and now.

—PASTOR OLSON POPP

God, you risked it all so that we would receive the gift of grace through an encounter with you. Thank you for giving us Jesus, who made this gift available for all people. May we trust that this grace doesn't end with us but extends out toward our neighbor and all people who you have called children of God. Amen.



T U E S D A Y , D E C E M B E R 2 3 , 2 0 2 5

No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

J O H N 1 : 1 8

For many years, my daughter has displayed a remarkable knack for asking deeply spiritual questions at bedtime (a perfectly timed ploy to stay up a little later): What does God look like? Is there really a heaven? How do we know if God exists?

The Gospel of John anticipates these timeless questions that have stirred people's hearts for generations and answers with a profound truth: Jesus makes God known. Throughout John's Gospel, Jesus speaks what he hears from God and does what he sees God doing. In other words, if you want to know who God is, what God values, and how God acts in the world—look to Jesus.

In everything Jesus says and does, the character of God becomes visible. When he weeps with the brokenhearted, we glimpse divine compassion. When he calls Lazarus from the tomb, we witness life's triumph over death. As he feeds the hungry, we see God's abundant generosity. When he gives sight to the blind, we encounter God's healing and restoring power. And when he turns water into wine, we sense God's delight in joy and celebration. Again and again, Jesus embodies the lavish, unrelenting love of God for all creation.

John tells us that Jesus is “close to the Father’s heart.” The Greek phrase is best translated “in the bosom of God”—an image of deep intimacy and tenderness. Jesus rests in God’s warm embrace, soothed by the steady rhythm of God’s heartbeat. And through Jesus, we are invited into that same closeness. Where do we dwell? In Christ—who himself dwells in the very bosom of God.

As we approach Christmas, we remember the One who comes into the world as a wailing baby and leaves it gasping for breath on the cross, revealing both God’s vulnerability and God’s power to redeem our suffering. Through him, we see a love that holds all things—and us—in its eternal embrace.

— D R . L A T I N I

Tender God, draw us close to your heart. Let your love steady our fears and soften our striving. May we rest in your embrace and reflect your compassion in this season and always. Amen.



WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2025

CHRISTMAS EVE

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered.

Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.'

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!'

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.'

So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

LUKE 2:1-18



As we've discovered again and again over the last four weeks, John's is a very different "Christmas story." No baby, after all, no manger or shepherds or magi or angels either. But it is nevertheless an essential part of our understanding of Christmas. And as we listen to the more familiar story from Luke today, I hope you hear it a bit differently and perhaps understand it a bit better. Because, ultimately, John helps us understand a little more about why the angels were so excited to share this message. Why the shepherds were so eager to see for themselves the child and his parents. Why they left again intent to share this good news. Why all who heard it were so amazed.

It's not, in the end, simply because a child was born. That is amazing, wondrous, something for which to be both overjoyed and grateful. Always. But this birth was different. For in this birth, God joined God's own divine and eternal nature to human flesh. Perfect joined to imperfect. Holy to ordinary. Immortal to mortal. Eternal to temporal. Almighty to vulnerable. As John puts it, "And the Word..." – the Word which is with God and is God and from whom all things come – "... became flesh and dwelt among us." And we, like the shepherds on that first Christmas night, "have beheld his glory, the glory of God's only son, full of grace and truth."

Because of that birth – that joining of divine and human that remains a mystery that we accept and trust more than understand – because of that birth, we can live with hope, compassion, and courage. Because God understands us. Because God knows us. Because God became one of us and thereby embraced us and our life completely. Because, finally, God in the child born that night showed just how much God loves us. Now, tomorrow, always, forever.

Blessed Christmas!

PASTOR LOSE AND ALL YOUR MOUNT OLIVET PASTORS AND STAFF



Christmas at Mount Olivet!

CHRISTMAS EVE MORNING WORSHIP SERVICES

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 24

10am, Mpls & West Campuses and livestreamed at mtolivet.org

CHRISTMAS EVE WORSHIP SERVICES

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 24

2-10pm, Mpls Campus and livestreamed hourly at mtolivet.org

1:40pm: Instrumental Prelude

2pm: Cherub and Cathedral Choirs and Orchestra

3pm: Alleluia and Cathedral Choirs and Orchestra

4pm: Hosanna and Cathedral Choirs and Orchestra

5pm: Chapel Choir and Piano Solo with Orchestra

6pm: Chancel Choir and Piano Solo with Orchestra

7, 8, & 9pm: Sanctuary Choir and Orchestra

10pm: Candlelight service with Sanctuary Choir and Orchestra

2-6pm, West Campus

2pm: Cherub, Alleluia, and Cathedral Choirs, String Quartet, and Harp

3pm: Hosanna, Chapel, and Cathedral Choirs, String Quartet, and Harp

4pm: Chancel and Sanctuary Choirs, String Quartet, and Harp

5pm: Sanctuary Choir, String Quartet, and Harp

6pm: Candlelight service with Sanctuary Choir, String Quartet, and Harp

CHRISTMAS DAY WORSHIP SERVICE

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 25

10am, Mpls Campus and livestreamed at mtolivet.org

