

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2025
FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT



ST. JOHN
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

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(NCH) New Century Hymnal - CCLI LICENSE #11164431

Unless otherwise noted, all scripture texts
are from the **Common English Bible (CEB)**

*Please stand if comfortably able
and respond with words in **bold** print

SUMMARY OF SCRIPTURE TEXTS
From “Preaching Through the Christian Year”

Fred Craddock

Isaiah 7:10-16 this passage contains the lines quoted by Matthew in the Gospel passage today.

Psalms 80:1-7, 17-19 is a petition of the people for help from their enemies, anticipates the Gospel’s reference to Joseph, and presents the situation of need to which the coming of Jesus responds.

Romans 1:1-7 the Christological confession that set the coming of Jesus in the context of God’s activity in history.

Matthew 1:18-25 reports of Joseph’s marriage to Mary, who is “with child of the Holy Spirit.”

ANNOUNCEMENTS AND PRAYER CONCERNS:

THE BELL IS RUNG:

PRELUDE: “Stars Over Bethlehem” Rob Roy Perry

PENNIES FOR MISSION: The Christmas Fund

***RESPONSIVE CALL TO WORSHIP:**

One: To love is the greatest gift bestowed upon us.

It is a surrender to God’s holy power.

**Many: God loves us, despite all our mistakes,
so we pray for the patience of hope!**

One: To be loved by God is the right of every living thing.

This love is the sun and the rain, it is the beginning and
end of all.

Many: God loves us even when we neglect our neighbors, so we pray for the strength to bring peace.

One: God's love is always a promise and a responsibility, and we are given this love freely. God demands nothing from us, yet knows we are capable of greatness.

Many: God loves us in the midst of destruction and despair, so we pray to share a vision of joy.

One: Love is a sacred vow God has made to us, a rainbow in the sky, a baby in the manger.

Many: God loves us just as we are, and we give thanks and whisper amen.

***INVOCATION:**

Emmanuel, we come today with arms wide open, ready to meet your precious son. Your love for us is so full that you sent a fragile babe to share your holy word, knowing that he would face human pain. Open us, God! Prepare us for his coming, that we may be messengers of your abundant love, and act to ease the suffering of all.

***OPENING HYMN: 105 "Gentle Joseph, Joseph Dear"**

***UNISON PRAYER FOR TRANSFORMATION AND NEW LIFE:**

Majestic Redeemer, in these last days before the birth of your son, we admit that we ask often for a sign. We put you to the test, beg for miracles, for mercy, for

proof of your holy word.

We doubt, even as we retell the old stories. We are like Joseph – shamed, questioning, fearful of the truth of Mary's dream – not wanting to be taken as fools for believing in something that seems too precious to be true. We are as afraid as the shepherds in their fields, sometimes as cowardly and cruel as Herod. You have given us the most sacred gift, yet we often lack the faith to accept it. Amen.

***WORDS OF GRACE:**

God's love for us encompasses every doubt and disaster we will imagine. God did not turn from our ancestors when they fell short, and God will not turn from us. Our humanity is not a flaw. It is the gift of the divine, sealed in Emmanuel's humanity. Praise be to God!

***GLORIA:**

Glory to the Creator, and the Christ and the Spirit so near. As it was from the start so it shall be forever, One God always here. (Repeat two more times.) (end) One God always here. One God always here.

LIGHTING THE CANDLE OF LOVE:

Today we light the Candle of Love. Over the past few weeks, we have sparked the light of hope, peace, and joy. Now, we come to love, which binds all of these

together. Each strand is braided gently into an image of God who protects, encourages, and endures.

We cannot look upon the face of God, but we can experience this love every time we experience hope, peace, and joy. We are not above suffering, but God promises, even in the midst of despair, love will pour down upon us. Just as we await the birth of our savior in the manger, God waits on us, watches over us, and sends us out into the world to do as Jesus did –
to care for our neighbors,
to give freely to those in need,
to call out tyranny,
to face down injustice –
knowing that God is with us. We are loved. We are love.

SCRIPTURE LESSONS:

Isaiah 7:10-16 From “The Message”

¹⁰⁻¹¹ God spoke again to Ahaz. This time he said, “Ask for a sign from your God. Ask anything. Be extravagant. Ask for the moon!”

¹² But Ahaz said, “I’d never do that. I’d never make demands like that on God!”

¹³⁻¹⁷ So Isaiah told him, “Then listen to this, government of David! It’s bad enough that you make people tired with your pious, timid hypocrisies, but now you’re making God

tired. So the Master is going to give you a sign anyway. Watch for this: A girl who is presently a virgin will get pregnant. She’ll bear a son and name him Immanuel (God-With-Us). By the time the child is twelve years old, able to make moral decisions, the threat of war will be over. Relax, those two kings that have you so worried will be out of the picture. But also be warned: God will bring on you and your people and your government a judgment worse than anything since the time the kingdom split, when Ephraim left Judah. The king of Assyria is coming!”

RESPONSORIAL PSALM: Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Pages 672-673

EPISTLE LESSON: Romans 1:1-7

1 From Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for God’s good news. ²⁻³ God promised this good news about his Son ahead of time through his prophets in the holy scriptures. His Son was descended from David. ⁴ He was publicly identified as God’s Son with power through his resurrection from the dead, which was based on the Spirit of holiness. This Son is Jesus Christ our Lord. ⁵ Through him we have received God’s grace and our appointment to be apostles. This was to bring all Gentiles to faithful obedience for his name’s sake. ⁶ You who are called by Jesus Christ are also included among these Gentiles.

⁷ To those in Rome who are dearly loved by God and called to be God's people.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

***GOSPEL LESSON: Matthew 1:18-25**

Birth of Jesus

¹⁸ This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary, his mother, was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. ²⁰ As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." ²² Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled:

²³ *Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, And they will call him, Emmanuel.*

(*Emmanuel* means "God with us.")

²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife. ²⁵ But he didn't

have sexual relations with her until she gave birth to a son. Joseph called him Jesus.

MESSAGE: "The Story Begins"

The wonderful story of Christmas has begun in our Gospel passage today. We all love the Christmas Story whichever Gospel we read it from. When I was growing up, on Christmas Eve, after we kids were ready for bed and in our pajamas, my father would read the Christmas story to us from the Bible. My dad was a quiet man and I don't remember any other time he read out loud from the Bible. So, this Christmas Eve ritual in our home was a big deal.

However, as many times as we have heard the Christmas story, there are a few things that, in our western world, may be confusing such as *engagement*, *betrothal*, and *marriage*. To our western ways of thinking, the relationships in this passage are very bewildering. I believe I had a minister explain this to our Youth Fellowship Group, but either it wasn't correct, or I have forgotten what he said. So, Let's hear Rev. William Barclay explain it.

"First, Joseph is said to be *betrothed* to Mary; then he is said to be planning quietly to *divorce* her; and then she is called his *wife*. But the relationships represent normal Jewish marriage procedure, in which there were three steps.

“First there was the *engagement*. The engagement was often made when the couple were only children. It was usually made through the parents, or through a professional matchmaker. And it was often made without the couple involved ever having seen each other. Marriage was held to be far too serious a step to be left to the dictates of the human heart.

“Secondly there was the *betrothal*. The betrothal was what we might call the ratification of the engagement into which the couple had previously entered. At this point the engagement, entered into by the parents or the matchmaker, could be broken if the girl was unwilling to go on with it. But once the betrothal was entered into, it was absolutely binding. It lasted for one year. During that year, the couple were known as husband and wife, although they had not the rights of husband and wife. It could not be terminated in any other way than by divorce. In the Jewish law, we frequently find that is to us a curious phrase. A girl whose fiance had died during the year of betrothal is called ‘a virgin who is a widow’. It was at this stage that Joseph and Mary were. They were betrothed; and if Joseph wished to end the betrothal, he could do so in no other way than by divorce; and in that year of betrothal, Mary was legally known as his wife.

“The third stage was *the marriage proper*, which took place at the end of the year of betrothal.

“If we remember the normal Jewish wedding customs, then the relationships in this passage are perfectly usual and perfectly clear.”

Does that explanation help?

“So, at this stage it was told to Joseph that Mary was to bear a child, that the child had been begotten by the Holy Spirit, and that he must call the child by the name Jesus. *Jesus* is the Greek form of the Jewish name *Joshua*, and *Joshua* means *Yahweh is salvation*.

“Long ago, the psalmist had heard God say: ‘It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities’ as we can read in Psalm 130:8. And Joseph was told that the child to be born would grow into the Savior who would save God’s people from their sins. Jesus was not so much the Man born to be King as the Man born to be Savior. He came to this world, not for his sake, but for us and for our salvation.”

BTW Rev. Barclay also has a wonderful way to enlighten us about the Holy Spirit that made Mary pregnant. It’s a rather long essay to help us understand so I’ll leave that for another time. However, I will give you a taste of what Rev. Barclay says. “In Jewish thought, the Holy Spirit had certain very definite functions. We cannot bring to this passage the *Christian* idea of Holy Spirit in all its fullness, because Joseph would know nothing about that. We must interpret it in the light of the *Jewish* idea of the Holy Spirit, for it is that idea that

Joseph would inevitably bring to this message, for that was all he knew.”

The Holy Spirit that we receive on Pentecost is different. Interesting? Yes? In the meantime, let’s enjoy the story that is familiar to us. Amen.

CHOIR ANTHEM: “What Is My Vision?” Dan Forrest

PASTORAL PRAYER:

Heavenly Parent, we are grateful for all the ways you have inspired us, taught us, shown us, and encouraged us to follow you. If we didn’t listen to your prophets, you did not give up on us. You sent your beautiful Son to guide us, heal us, and demonstrate the fullness of your message, dear God. Thank you.

As we are trying to follow in the ways of our blessed Jesus, we pray for all your children of the world, young and old. You are the parent of us all and we are the siblings of all your people. We should care for all of them as deeply as you do.

God of peace, who declared peace on earth and goodwill to all humanity, and embodied that friendliness in the incarnation of the eternal Son, Prince of peace, anoint the church with the same Spirit, to preach glad tidings of great joy to all people. May the Savior’s offer of pardon and peace in the forgiveness of sins by his sacrificial life and death be the re-creation of individuals

who repent and believe your promises. May the conversion of the unbelieving and disobedient bring new spiritual health to our society, and peace beyond understanding.

This morning we pray for all those who are unable to bring a feast to their table, or toys for their children, or heat enough in their homes, or the ability and finances to take their sick children for medical care because their insurance has been discontinued, or the loss of their jobs because of “down sizing” to save money for the government. May those of us who have enough share with those who have nothing.

We pray for all those on our prayer list and all others who are in pain, grieving, lonely, or who have received a terrible diagnosis. Bless all people in the medical field who strive to bring comfort to those in unwell circumstances. They are the ones God is sending to help all of us.

As we look forward to the birth of Jesus, we pray in his name . . .

OUR LORD’S PRAYER:

PRAYER REPONSE:

Be near me, Lord Jesus; I ask you to stay

close by me forever and love me, I pray.

**Bless all the dear children in your tender care,
and fit us for heaven to live with you there.**

INVITATION TO GENEROSITY

This is a week when we often feel the disparity between the haves and the have nots. Many will go into debt striving for a perfect holiday, while others cannot even imagine the ability to have such a day. God has told us many times and, in many ways, where love flows from – it comes from the hand we extend when we have enough and even when we do not. Let us bring forth the true joy of this season and give as much as we are able.

OFFERTORY: “How Great Our Joy” James Mansfield

***DOXOLOGY:**

**Praise God from whom all blessings flow;
Praise God, all creatures here below;
Praise God above you heavenly host;
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen**

***UNISON PRAYER OF DEDICATION AND THANKSGIVING:**

Love and Light of the world, we give you thanks for these gifts. We give you thanks for the privilege of generosity. We give you thanks for the ability to share your divine love in a tangible form with our siblings around the world. Help us to remember, as we await Christ’s birth, to give more generously than we receive, knowing we will always be rich in your abundant love. Amen

***CLOSING HYMN: 102 “O How Shall I Receive You”**

***BENEDICTION:**

Let us go out into the world with the extravagance of God’s love in our hearts! Let us savor the moments of joy, whether from the excitement of the season or the peace of a deeply feeling spirit. We are messengers of hope in a waiting world. May we leave this worship refreshed, ready to take your radical ministry of extravagant hope, everlasting peace, exuberant joy, and abundant love into the world. Amen

***BENEDICTION RESPONSE:**

“Let There Be Peace on Earth”

THE BELL IS RUNG:

POSTLUDE: “Keep Christ in Christmas” Robert J. Hughes

PRAYER LIST: Camille Abboud, Becky Ballard, Mary Lou and Urban Baum, Ronald Bopp, Private Ben Boyle, Lorraine Brown, GERALYN GAMMON, Marilyn Paul, Ella Perez, Pam and Syd Safriet, Gloria Stephens, Yvonne Weber, Sue and Dave in Florida, Russ Hartmann, David Jacknewicz.