



November 30, 2018

Greetings friends:

This year Marta and I celebrated Thanksgiving with our children and grandchildren in Connecticut, hosted by our younger daughter Emily and her husband Alex. On Friday, I got to help Emily hang Christmas lights, which took me back to earlier years when she and I would hang the lights on our home in Newport Beach, never hanging the lights *before* Thanksgiving, but always trying to be the first in the cul-de-sac to get them up the Friday after! Back home, the Christmas carols also came out the day after Thanksgiving and provide the musical score as we decorate *our* home, as I drive around the city, even as I work in the office.

Family, traditions, and music. These are some of the things that bring me joy as I think about Advent and celebrating the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

By God's grace, I have been blessed to be able to count on what one writer calls "thick community"—a place where I feel like I belong, and that is inhabited by a group of people who know me well and love me anyway. I speak, of course, of my family in Michigan, Connecticut, or Massachusetts—but not just of them. I also give thanks for my place among the family of God, and particularly among the family of God that gathers at First Presbyterian Church. With a family that is scattered geographically, Marta and I are especially grateful for our friends and family here at FPC that remind us daily of Christ's love and grace and have often been our "present family" on holidays and at other times.

As I write, however, I am acutely aware of those for whom the words "community" or "Christmas traditions" carry a different meaning. There has been much written of late about the growing social isolation and loneliness in our city and in our country—and we all know people for whom this season can be hard as it coincides with personal seasons of grief, loss, or trial. As we all know, Christmas can be hard and even exhausting.

So, this season, I wonder if I could invite you to join me in celebrating a little *less* Christmas... and a little *more* Advent! During the season of Advent, we rejoice in the *first* coming of Jesus Christ, who came to show us the deep love that God has for each of us and to teach us how we can better love God and each other. During Advent we celebrate the reality that Christ lives among us and can be our joy, our hope, and even our song in all seasons of life. And, during Advent we celebrate the creation of Christ's *church* and the incredible invitation that we have and that we can extend to others—to be a part of the "thick community" here at FPC. Moreover, during Advent we are also reminded that we yearn and long for Christ's *second* coming, when He will set all things right for all of God's creation. I guess what I'm saying is that if we'll lift our gaze off of *Christmas* for a bit and focus instead on celebrating *Advent*, we might better see and appreciate the hope that is ours through Jesus Christ.

To this end, I'd like to invite you to begin the celebration of Advent this Sunday with the FPC family and to make every effort to join us in worship each week as we reflect on the great promises of the gospel through our theme *The Song of Advent*. In the weeks ahead, we will allow a selection of great and historic hymns and carols like *Lo, How A Rose E'er Blooming* or *Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence* guide our reflection and inspire our celebration. I'd also like to invite you to join us for some of our special traditions of the season. Links to the song for each week and a list of Advent activities can be found on our [Advent](#) page.

Finally, I'd like to invite you to think of some of the folks you know, neighbors, co-workers, friends, and even family, who might be blessed, and even find comfort and hope, through an invitation to join you this Advent season. Together we will celebrate the great gift of Jesus Christ and all of the promises that are ours through that gift.

Your brother in Christ,

Jim Birchfield
Senior Pastor