

12.28.25 ~ 1st Sunday after Christmas Day

“What Comes After Christmas?”

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Words of Foundation

Isaiah 61:1-7 ^{NIV}

Pew Bible 641

¹ The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, ² to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, ³ and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called **oaks of righteousness**, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor.

⁴ They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations. ⁵ Strangers will shepherd your flocks; foreigners will work your fields and vineyards. ⁶ And you will be called priests of the Lord, you will be named ministers of our God. You will feed on the wealth of nations, and in their riches you will boast.

⁷ Instead of your shame you will receive a double portion, and instead of disgrace you will rejoice in your inheritance. And so you will inherit a double portion in your land, and everlasting joy will be yours.

Leader: These Are the Words of Hopeful Prophecy.

People: Thanks be to God!

Words of Growth

1 Corinthians 3:6-9 ^{NIV}

Pew Bible 992

⁶ I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. ⁷ So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. ⁸ The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. ⁹ For we are co-workers in God’s service; you are God’s field, God’s building.

Leader: These Are Words of Instruction.

People: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

God, you are the Lord of our lives. We come to worship today on the first Sunday after Christmas with joy in our hearts from a wonderful holiday. But some may be hurting or missing loved ones or may be in a life crisis of some kind; for them, we do pray for your intervention and comfort. As we look forward to what comes after Christmas, help us to open our minds and hearts to you and your guidance. Calm us so that we may begin the new year in reflection and vision casting for ourselves and our church. As we worship and study your Scripture, may we internalize the incarnation of Jesus, knowing the who, what, why, when, and where of the Gospel

story. Please speak through this message and messenger as we carry on the spirit of Christmas! In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Merry Christmas and (almost) Happy New Year! Thank you to our musicians, choir members, congregants, and guests for your presence here at our Christmas Eve Candlelight and Communion service. I had many positive comments about how beautiful the music, poinsettias, and the tree were. If you did not get a chance to take a photo by the tree, please stay a few minutes after today's service. We can help you if you have your phone or camera.

We are in Christmastide for the next two weeks, but until I arrived here, I had never heard of Christmastide, so let me remind you. For many Christians, it is the Twelve Days of Christmas, lasting from December 25th to January 5th. So, we can still sing Christmas carols and follow the stories of the witnesses to Jesus' birth! Next week, we'll meet the wise men or the magi. But first, let's see where we have been as a church and how we've grown as the body of Christ. Our themes since I became pastor in 2019 have helped us grow spiritually and grow together as a congregation. Key Scriptures accompanied each theme as we discerned God's direction: Holy Interruptions, Be Sustained was the pandemic year of 2020, Dream Dreams, Listen for the Work, Divine Experiments, Finding Beauty, and last year Vital Hospitality. Each week's sermons and music have built upon one another to stretch us, reveal spiritual gifts, engage our faith, inspire our imaginations, and motivate us to action. From my perch, despite health issues and personal losses, I observe growth and development.

So, allow me to pose the question, “What happens after Christmas?” It is time to introduce our 2026 theme, “Roots and Branches.” I have mentioned it already, but I am still studying the topic to decide about our key verse. It will appear on the entrance bulletin board soon. The two passages today will get us started and will connect Christmas with what comes after.

The anointed one, the Messiah, was prophesied in our first passage, Isaiah 61 and in hundreds of Old Testament Scriptures. Even Jesus, after his testing in the wilderness, went to synagogue and spoke the words of the prophet about himself in Luke 4:18-19. He knew his purpose, the “why” we spoke of on Christmas Eve, but the people did not understand yet. He was sent to preach good news, to heal and free others, comfort those who mourn, and through his ministry on earth would declare God’s splendor. Even his birth announcements were angelic messages not just for the shepherds or magi, but for the Jewish people! This Messiah would rebuild cities and restore the people in covenant with God, many of whom had broken several Godly covenants over the centuries. This Messiah would be a redeeming messenger from God!

We just celebrated the beginning of Jesus’ incarnation, and he ticked all the boxes, right? We know because of what we know of Jesus’ life’s ministry that he indeed did most of what Isaiah foretold. And later, the apostles Peter and Paul carried on his work forming new churches, teaching Jesus’ lessons, spreading the Good News of the Gospel as eyewitnesses, and sharing Jesus’ message of hope and redemption. Even Easter only gets us near the end of his story; we will not know the how of eternal life and restoration until we meet Jesus ourselves either in heaven

or at his return. So, how do we get from the prequel (prophecy), introduction (angelic announcements and dreams), and the beginning (manger scene) of Jesus' story to the middle and the end? "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit (Isaiah 11:1 ^{ESV}).” Jesus was later thought to be and eventually declared to be the root of Jesse; just re-read Matthew's genealogical first chapter.

Using our storytelling lesson from Christmas Eve, with the 5 W's (Who, What, When, Where, and Why), one image Scripture uses throughout both Hebrew and Greek Scriptures is the tree. We see olive trees, fig trees, palm trees, apple trees, mustard trees and more types throughout. What I find intriguing is that I did not see too many trees in Israel; they use stone rather than wood because the desert rocks are more plentiful. There is a recent effort to "green Israel" and conserve or replant native trees destroyed during wars or commercial development. Most of the trees I personally saw were farmed in orchards for their fruit, like pomegranates, oranges, date palms, fig, and of course olive trees. Online research says there are many more trees native to Israel like pistachio, almond, acacia, mulberry, juniper, pine, laurel, and of course oaks. Trees are well respected in the Bible: "God said, 'Let the earth yield grass, herbs yielding seeds, and fruit trees bearing fruit after their kind, with their seeds in it, on the earth;' and it was so (Genesis 1:11)." David uses them often in the Psalms and there are many proverbs using trees to describe a behavior desired. Zaccheus climbed a tree to see Jesus! Jesus uses trees in his parables, like the fig tree in Matthew 24:32-35 or Mark 11:12-14. We will explore some of the many passages over the next year.

Isaiah's metaphor of trees, specifically Oaks of Righteousness, has always touched me because of a childhood huge oak I used to lean against to think, ponder, and pray. And of course, we mourned when our church 100-year-old oak died and had to be removed for safety. I am speaking of a figurative Oak of Righteousness, however; that is each true believer would qualify with a strong character for broad roots as their foundation and a tall, strong, and fortified trunk to stand able in the midst of any storm. Out of a stable trunk grows branches: some are thick, some thin, some are healthy and others are weak. We will develop relevant topics from these sources like legacy, foundation, nourishment, health, stability, resilience, flexibility, growth, dormancy, identifying, pruning, grafting, bearing fruit, and planting. This next year's study arc will go from Roots to Trunk to Branches to Leaves with a few parables over of the summer. By autumn, we'll look at fertilizing, branch development and/or pruning, like the bonsai.

In the second passage, we know the Corinthian church had misunderstandings and divisions about Jesus, the cross, and what righteousness meant. There was rivalry, competition, power grabs, elitism, and more sin. Sound a little like today's news stories? It was a diverse community with influences from East and West. The disagreements were all about human desires and power, not really about God. Only God could make the seeds of faith grow. Apollos and Paul were given the ministry vocation by Christ himself but people still quarreled much like today. Both were called to be church planters, waterers, and leaders who functioned under the authority of God. The Acts church development Scriptures are good stories to follow, but first

we'll begin with wisdom and the gifts given to Jesus as a baby and how he was protected from death as a child yet driven to death as an adult. The best news is that we know most of the rest of the story, and we have hope that the ending is eternal life. For that our faith is certain and our striving should only be to draw closer to Jesus in relationship. We will never be perfect or even close to righteous. Let us continue meeting together as we are taught. I believe all the work we've been doing up to now has better prepared us to keep moving forward. "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" and Hallelujah! May he favor our efforts to serve him well as a congregation as we enter 2026! See you in the new year! Amen! ||

Pray with me now: Insightful God, we thank you for your son, Jesus. Help us to digest these words and remember them so that we strengthen our relationship with you and Jesus. You were with us in our various holiday celebrations and conversations, so let us carry those memories into the new year. Help us to share where we see Christ at work in our daily lives. Make us spiritually prosperous this season as we ask you to fill this sanctuary with those seeking your presence. Open our imaginations to see trees, stability, and growth as a metaphor for our faith in you. And please keep us all safe and healthy in the new year. In the holy name of Jesus, we pray, Amen.