New River
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH



Advent 2026

The Courage *of Christmas*

A PRAYER CALENDAR, DEVOTIONAL & BIBLE STUDY GUIDE

The Courage to Hope – to Make Peace – to Rejoice – to Love

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The original ideas, theological reflections, and conceptual framework are the work of Rev. Dr. Eustacia Moffett Marshall. Artificial intelligence (AI) was used to assist with editing, formatting, and presentation.

NOVEMBER 29 – DECEMBER 25, 2026

Advent Prayer Calendar, Devotional & Bible Study Guide

What Is Advent?

Advent means "coming." It begins four Sundays before Christmas and opens a new year in the church calendar. We prepare to celebrate Jesus' birth in Bethlehem and look ahead to his coming again, when God will make all things new. In the meantime, we pay attention to how Christ is already at work among us. Each Sunday at New River, the themes of Advent will guide our prayers and help us practice the courage we see in the Christmas story.

How Long Is Advent?

Sunday, November 29 - Thursday, December 24, 2026

About this year's focus - Why Courage Matters for the Season

Many picture Christmas as soft and quiet: a sleeping baby, a still night, a peaceful mother. Scripture tells a braver story. Mary is a young, unmarried woman in an occupied land, and her "yes" puts her body, her reputation, and her safety at risk. Joseph risks his good name. Jesus, the Word made flesh, enters the world as a vulnerable child in a poor family, under an empire that will soon try to kill him. This year, we are paying attention to those who carry heavy loads, to people the world overlooks, and to the God who sees them. The fact is - carrying the Christ came with a cost.

What cost are we willing to carry for the sake of the Christ? This Advent, we will sit with this question as we wait for Jesus. We will hear Mary ask an honest question ("How can this be?), receive a blessing from Elizabeth, and sing of a God who lifts up the lowly. Still, Mary's "yes" has a cost. The child she carries willingly enters the vulnerability of human life, and his path leads to the cross.

Faith often asks us to live, as Alice Walker put it, "outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful," in a world that would rather dim our light.

This kind of courage is not the absence of fear. It is bold faithfulness while afraid, practiced in community and grounded in the God who says "Do not be afraid," and then stays with us. Courage never means carrying everything alone or enduring what God never asked us to bear. Even Mary did not carry the miracle by herself. She went to Elizabeth. She had a relationship with Joseph, who did not abandon her. Holy courage is not a solo act. It is a shared "yes," held up by God and by the people God places beside us. This Advent, may we be brave enough to carry what God entrusts to us, and humble enough to let others help us carry it.

How to Use This Guide

Daily

Each day, you are invited to follow the calendar - reading the Scripture of the day, pausing with the reflection, and offering the prayer.

Weekly

Each week opens with a *short reflection* on what that week's courage cost Mary and Jesus, and what it asks of us. Also, included each week is the church-wide *bible study focus*. We will use this reference for our online bible studies, held Wednesdays at 6:30 PM in New River's zoom room. You can also use the bible study focus in your own small group, or at home with your family. You are encouraged to read the weekly passage aloud, spend time with the two questions, and name one action to take before the next bible study.

2026 Daily Scripture Calendar Summary

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
Hope • The courage to trust what God has promised						
Nov 29 Isaiah 9:2–7	**Nov 30** Luke 1:26–33	**Dec 1** Luke 1:34–38	**Dec 2** Romans 4:18–21	**Dec 3** Psalm 130:1–8	**Dec 4** Luke 1:39–45	**Dec 5** Romans 15:4–13
Peace • The courage to protect and make peace						
Dec 6 Matthew 1:18–25	**Dec 7** Luke 1:67–79	**Dec 8** Isaiah 2:1–5	**Dec 9** Romans 12:14–21	**Dec 10** Ephesians 2:13–18	**Dec 11** Matthew 5:9, 23–24	**Dec 12** Philippians 4:4–9
Joy • The courage to sing boldly and out loud about what God is doing, even in hard times						
Dec 13 Luke 1:39–45	**Dec 14** Luke 1:46–55	**Dec 15** Psalm 126:1–6	**Dec 16** Habakkuk 3:17–19	**Dec 17** Isaiah 35:1–10	**Dec 18** Luke 2:8–14	**Dec 19** Luke 2:15–20
Love • The courage to say "yes" to a costly love as Mary and Jesus did						
Dec 20 Luke 1:26–38 & Philippians 2:5–8	**Dec 21** Matthew 1:20–25	**Dec 22** Luke 2:22–35	**Dec 23** Matthew 2:13–15	**Dec 24** Luke 2:1–7 & 2:19	**Dec 25** John 1:1–14	

These four weeks lead us to our Christmas *Fine Arts* presentation on Sunday, December 20: *Carrying the Miracle: The Courage to Carry What God Has Entrusted (see attached notice).* By the time we gather on December 20th, may we understand more deeply what it cost to carry Jesus, and what it means for us to carry his love into West Philadelphia and the world.


CARRYING THE MIRACLE:
The Courage to Carry What God Entrusted
A Special New River Christmas Fine Arts Presentation.
SUNDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2026
11:00 AM

The Courage to Hope

The courage to trust what God has promised

Weekly Reflection

Hope takes courage because it asks us to trust a promise before we can see it fulfilled. Mary heard Gabriel's word long before anyone could see what she was carrying. Hope is not wishful thinking. It is leaning on God's faithfulness while the evidence is still hidden.

What it cost Mary

She agreed to carry a promise no one else could see, and to be misunderstood while she waited.

What it cost Jesus

The Son of God entered the world the way every child does: small, hidden, and fully dependent on others.

What it asks of us

To trust God with what is not yet visible – i.e. the healing, justice, provision, the answers we are still waiting for.

Sun, Nov 29 // Hope Dares to Expect

Isaiah 9:2–7

Isaiah speaks to people walking in deep darkness under a heavy yoke and promises a child whose reign will bring justice without end. That promise waited centuries to be fulfilled. The courage to hope is the courage to keep expecting God's justice while the darkness is still real, for ourselves and for our whole community.

Pray

God of light, give our neighborhood, our city, and our homes the courage to expect your justice and to work for it while we wait.

Mon, Nov 30 // Hope Begins with God's Word

Luke 1:26–33

Before Mary does anything, Gabriel tells her she is favored and that God is with her. Her hope does not begin with her own strength. It begins with what God has said about her. When the world thinks less of us than God does, the courage to hope means believing God's word first.

Pray

God who favors the overlooked, help me trust what you say about me more than what the world has said.

Tue, Dec 1 // Hope can Ask Questions

Luke 1:34–38

Mary asks, "How can this be?" God answers her instead of rebuking her. Then she says "yes" to a promise that will cost her. Hope is not blind. The courage to hope includes bringing God our honest questions and still trusting what we cannot yet explain.

Pray

God, here is the question I have been afraid to ask. Give me courage to ask it and to keep trusting you.

Wed, Dec 2 // Hope with Open Eyes

Romans 4:18–21

Abraham "hoped against hope." He looked honestly at his own age and at Sarah's barrenness, and still trusted God to keep the promise. The courage to hope does not deny the facts. It refuses to let the facts have the last word over God's faithfulness.

Pray

Faithful God, strengthen all who are waiting on a diagnosis, a court date, a job, or a child. Let them face the facts without losing hope.

Thu, Dec 3 // Hope from the Depths

Psalm 130:1–8

The psalmist cries out from the depths and waits for God more than night watchers wait for morning. Lament is not a lack of faith. It is hope that refuses to stop talking to God. Some days the courage to hope looks like crying out one more time.

Pray

Lord, hear those who cry from the depths tonight. Give us courage to keep watch with them until morning comes.

Fri, Dec 4 // Hope Has a Witness

Luke 1:39–45

Mary is carrying a promise no one else can see, so she goes to Elizabeth. Before Mary says a word, Elizabeth confirms what God has done. Hope grows stronger when someone else can see it too. The courage to hope includes finding people who will believe with us.

Pray

God, send me someone who will believe your promise with me, and make me that kind of witness for someone else.

Sat, Dec 5 // Hope We Hold Together

Romans 15:4–13

Paul prays that the God of hope will fill the church so that we "abound in hope." Here hope belongs to a community that welcomes one another as Christ welcomed us. When one of us runs low, the rest can hold hope for a while. That too is the courage to hope.

Pray

God of hope, fill New River until hope overflows. Show us who needs us to hold hope for them this week.

Wednesday Bible Study · December 2, 2026

Luke 1:26–38

Read the passage twice. Notice what God promises Mary, the honest question she asks, and her yes.

Consider

Mary is young, poor, and living under occupation, exactly the kind of person the world overlooks. God's messenger comes to her, and she is free to question before she agrees. Her "How can this be?" is part of her faith, not a lapse in it. Courage includes having a voice.

1. Gabriel tells Mary she is favored and that God is with her before she says yes. How does knowing what God has promised give us the courage to hope?

2. Mary asks, "How can this be?" What questions are you bringing to God this Advent, and what promise helps you keep hoping while you wait?

Faith in Action: Name one promise of God you are holding on to. Write it down and share it with one person before we meet again.

The Courage to Make Peace

The courage to protect and make peace

Weekly Reflection

The peace of Christ is not the same as keeping quiet to keep things calm. Jesus was born under the Roman Empire's so-called peace, a peace kept by force and paid for by the poor. God's peace is shalom: wholeness, safety, and right relationship. Making that kind of peace often costs us comfort and reputation.

What it cost Mary and Joseph

Mary faced public shame and real danger in a society that could punish a woman in her position. Joseph chose to protect her dignity, at the cost of his own good name.

What it cost Jesus

He was born into an occupied land, counted in Caesar's census, and named Emmanuel, God with us, in the very place where peace was most broken.

What it asks of us

To protect people who are vulnerable, to refuse a false peace that leaves harm in place, and to do our part to repair what is broken.

Sun, Dec 6 // Peace Protects the Vulnerable

Matthew 1:18–25

Joseph could have exposed Mary to public shame. He chose to protect her, and when God spoke, he took her as his wife, though it cost him his reputation. The courage to make peace often means using whatever power we have to shield someone more vulnerable than we are.

Pray

Emmanuel, give me courage to protect someone's dignity, even when it costs me comfort or reputation.

Mon, Dec 7 // Peace is a Road

Luke 1:67–79

After months of silence, Zechariah sings that God's tender mercy will "guide our feet into the way of peace." Peace is a road, not only a feeling. The courage to make peace is the courage to take the next step on that road, even before we can see where it ends.

Pray

Merciful God, guide my feet toward one step of peace today, in my home, on my block, or in my church.

Tue, Dec 8 / Peace Lays Down Weapons

Isaiah 2:1–5

Isaiah sees nations beating their swords into plowshares. God's peace is not quiet held in place by fear. It turns tools of harm into tools that feed people. The courage to make peace asks what we must lay down, whether weapons, sharp words, or old grudges, so that life can grow.

Pray

God of peace, end the gun violence in our city. Turn our resources toward what helps our neighbors live and flourish.

Wed, Dec 9 // Peace Without Revenge

Romans 12:14–21

Paul calls us to bless instead of curse and to live peaceably "so far as it depends on you." That phrase is honest. Peace takes two, and some harm is not ours to fix. The courage to make peace means doing our part fully and leaving vengeance to God.

Pray

God, show me what is mine to repair and what is yours to judge. Free me from the need to get even.

Thu, Dec 10 // Peace Tears Down Walls

Ephesians 2:13–18

Christ "is our peace." He breaks down the dividing wall of hostility and brings near those who were far off. This peace does not ask outsiders to stay quietly outside. The courage to make peace means removing whatever keeps people at the edges, even a wall that has stood a long time.

Pray

Jesus, show New River where we have kept people at a distance, and give us courage to bring them near.

Fri, Dec 11 // Peace Goes First

Matthew 5:9, 23–24

Jesus blesses the peacemakers and tells us to leave our gift at the altar and be reconciled first. He does not tell us to wait for the other person to move. The courage to make peace means owning the harm we have caused and taking the first step.

Pray

God, give me courage to apologize without excuses and to listen without defending myself.

Sat, Dec 12 // Peace that Guards the Heart

Philippians 4:4–9

Paul writes from prison that the peace of God will guard our hearts and minds. This peace does not depend on our circumstances. What sustains the courage to make peace with others is receiving God's peace ourselves, in prayer and with thanksgiving, even in hard places.

Pray

God, here is what weighs on me, and here is what I am grateful for. Guard my heart with your peace.

Wednesday Bible Study · December 9, 2026

Matthew 1:18–25

Trace Joseph's choices before and after the dream. Notice who is most at risk in this story and how Joseph uses the power he has.

Consider

Matthew tells this story from Joseph's side, but Mary is the one most at risk. Joseph's courage lies in using the power he has to protect her rather than expose her. In this story, peace means protecting the dignity of the person with the least power.

1. Joseph had the legal right to expose Mary but chose to protect her. What did making peace cost him, and what did it protect?

2. Where in our homes, church, or neighborhood would real peace require someone to give up comfort, status, or reputation?

Faith in Action: Look for one place this week where you can use your voice, time, or influence to protect someone's dignity, and do it.

The Courage to Rejoice

The courage to sing boldy and out loud about what God is doing, even in hard times

Weekly Reflection

Joy is not pretending everything is fine. In Scripture, joy often rises from people who had every reason to stay silent: an older woman once called barren, a pregnant young woman from a small town, shepherds working the night shift. Their joy tells the truth about what God is doing, and that truth threatens everything that depends on keeping the lowly low.

What it cost Mary

She sang out loud that God brings down the powerful and lifts up the lowly. It was a dangerous song for a poor young woman living under empire.

What it cost Jesus

From the beginning, his coming was good news to the poor and a threat to Herod, whose fear soon turned deadly.

What it asks of us

To rejoice honestly, even while we grieve, and to say plainly where we have seen God at work.

Sun, Dec 13 // Joy Speaks Up

Luke 1:39–45

Elizabeth, once called barren and long hidden away, cries out “with a loud voice” to bless Mary. Women whose stories others whispered about, are the first to announce what God is doing. The courage to rejoice means telling the truth about God’s goodness out loud.

Pray

God, loosen my tongue to bless someone today with specific, truthful words about your work in their life.

Mon, Dec 14 // Joy that Turns Things Over

Luke 1:46–55

Mary sings that God has scattered the proud, brought down the powerful, lifted up the lowly, and filled the hungry. Her joy is a protest song. The courage to rejoice tells the truth that God stands with the overlooked, even when the powerful do not want to hear it.

Pray

God who lifts up the lowly, let our joy move us to share food, attention, and power with our neighbors.

Tue, Dec 15 // Joy Through Tears

Psalm 126:1–6

The psalm remembers when God restored the people and filled their mouths with laughter, then asks God to do it again. Those who sow in tears will reap with shouts of joy. The courage to rejoice does not skip over grief. It plants our tears like seeds and trusts God with the harvest.

Pray

God, tend what we have sown in tears. Give us companions for the waiting and for the rejoicing.

Wed, Dec 16 // Joy When the Fields are Bare

Habakkuk 3:17–19

Habakkuk honestly names the failed crops and the empty stalls. Then he says, "yet I will rejoice in the Lord." This joy does not depend on how things look. The courage to rejoice tells the whole truth about loss and still finds strength in God.

Pray

God of my salvation, be close to everyone for whom this season feels empty, and be their strength.

Thu, Dec 17 // Joy that Strengthens Others

Isaiah 35:1–10

Isaiah sees the desert in bloom and tells God's people to strengthen weak hands and to say to fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear!" This joy is not private. The courage to rejoice includes carrying good news to people too tired to believe it yet.

Pray

God, show me one weary person I can encourage today, and give me words that strengthen.

Fri, Dec 18 // Joy for All the People

Luke 2:8–14

The angel brings "good news of great joy for all the people" first to shepherds, night-shift workers that respectable people looked down on. God's joy starts at the margins. The courage to rejoice believes that good news is meant for the people the world forgets.

Pray

God, let your good news reach those working through the holidays and those whose labor goes unseen.

Sat, Dec 19 // Joy Tells What it Has Seen

Luke 2:15–20

The shepherds go and see, then tell everyone what they had heard about the child, and all who hear are amazed. Their testimony is simple: we saw it for ourselves. The courage to rejoice means telling someone where you have seen God at work.

Pray

Jesus, help me notice your presence and find honest words to tell someone about it this week.

Wednesday Bible Study · December 16, 2026

Luke 1:39–56

Read Elizabeth's blessing and Mary's song aloud. Notice how Mary's joy moves from what God has done for her to what God does for whole communities.

Consider

Two women whose pregnancies others might whisper about recognize God's work in each other before anyone else does. Elizabeth blesses Mary before Mary says a word, and Mary stays with her about three months. Joy grows where women are believed, affirmed, and not left alone.

1. Who is brought down and who is lifted up in Mary's song? Why would rejoicing like this take courage for a poor young woman living under empire?

2. What truth about God's goodness do we need the courage to say out loud this season, even while some of us are grieving?

Faith in Action: Bless someone this week with specific, truthful words about what you see God doing in their life.

The Courage to Love

The courage to say "yes" to a costly love as Mary and Jesus did

Weekly Reflection

This week brings us to the heart of Christmas. Love is costly. Mary carried Jesus in her body, gave birth far from home, and fled with him as a refugee. Jesus emptied himself, took on our flesh, and walked a path that led to the cross. Scripture tells us that perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18). Love does not wait for fear to leave. It carries what God has entrusted anyway.

What it cost Mary

Her body, her future, and her heart. Simeon told her that a sword would pierce her own soul.

What it cost Jesus

Everything. He set aside his heavenly privileges, was born a vulnerable child, became a refugee in Egypt, and gave his life on the cross.

What it asks of us

To carry what God has entrusted to us, and to help carry what others are holding, so that no one bears it alone.

Sun, Dec 20 // Love Says Yes

Luke 1:26–38 and Philippians 2:5–8

Mary's "yes" involves her body, her relationships, and her future. Christ "emptied himself," took on our flesh, and was obedient to the point of death. On this Sunday of Carrying the Miracle, we see that love is costly. The courage to love means saying yes to carry what God has entrusted to us, knowing the cost.

Pray

Jesus, you carried us all the way to the cross. Give us courage to carry what you have entrusted to us.

Mon, Dec 21 // Love Shares the Load

Matthew 1:20–25

The angel tells Joseph, "Do not be afraid," and he takes Mary as his wife and names the child Jesus. Mary will not carry the miracle alone. The courage to love includes stepping in to share the cost when someone else is carrying a heavy calling.

Pray

God, bring to mind one person who needs practical help, and give me courage to offer something specific.

Tue, Dec 22 // Love and the Sword

Luke 2:22–35

In the middle of a blessing, Simeon tells Mary that a sword will pierce her own soul. To love Jesus is to risk grief, a cost many mothers know well. The courage to love means loving fully even when we cannot protect the ones we love from suffering.

Pray

God, be near every parent who loves someone they cannot shield from harm. Hold their grief and their love together.

Wed, Dec 23 // Love Protects Life

Matthew 2:13–15

When Herod seeks to kill the child, Joseph takes Jesus and Mary and flees by night to Egypt. The Savior of the world becomes a refugee. The courage to love sometimes means leaving everything to protect life, and it calls us to welcome those who are fleeing today.

Pray

God, protect families forced to flee their homes, and give us courage to make room for those seeking safety.

Thu, Dec 24 // Christmas Eve · Love Delivered

Luke 2:1–7 and 2:19

Far from home and under Caesar's orders, Mary gives birth and lays her son in a manger because there is no room for them. Later she treasures all these things in her heart. Tonight the miracle Mary carried is delivered. Take a moment to consider what God has entrusted to you, and what you need help carrying.

Pray

Jesus, born among us, meet us in the quiet of this night. Be near to those who are alone, grieving, or keeping watch.

Fri, Dec 25 // Christmas Day · Love Made Flesh

John 1:1–14

The Word became flesh and lived among us. God did not love us from a distance. God took on a body, a family, and a neighborhood. Christmas shows us the courage of love: God came close, at great cost. Today we receive that love and carry it to one another.

Pray

Jesus, thank you for coming to live among us. Make your love real through our life together at New River.

Wednesday Bible Study · December 23, 2026

Luke 1:26–38 and Philippians 2:5–11

Read Mary's response alongside Paul's hymn about Christ emptying himself. Then read Luke 2:34–35 to hear what Mary herself will face.

Consider

Mary and Jesus both say "yes" to a costly love, and neither is asked to carry it alone. Mary has Elizabeth and Joseph, and Jesus gathers a community around him. Faithful love is not silent suffering or endless self-sacrifice. It is love that is shared, protected, and carried together.

1. What did Mary's yes cost her, and what did Christ's self-emptying cost him? What does that teach us about the courage to love?

2. What has God entrusted to you to carry? Who could help you carry it, and whose load could you help carry?

Faith in Action: Ask one person who is carrying a heavy load this season how you can help in a specific way, and follow through before the new year.