The background is a solid teal color. In the top-left corner, there is a vertical trail of gold glitter. At the bottom, there is a watercolor-style landscape with dark green trees on the left and a white and light blue ground area on the right, also accented with gold glitter. A large, multi-layered orange geometric shape, resembling a stylized star or a series of overlapping polygons, is centered on the page. The text is written in white cursive script within this shape.

Journey  
to  
Bethlehem

Advent 2022



# Introduction

## PASTOR ERIC SPIVEY

In the summer of 2009, Marcia, Sarah Margaret, Sydney, and I set out from Beaufort, South Carolina on a road trip to the Grand Canyon in Arizona. To document our journey, our family kept a daily internet blog - sharing stories and pictures of our journey. Each day, one of us would describe an amazing experience from that day's stop. Every mile on the journey became a story. When we returned home, we turned the blog into a picture album which we all cherish to this day.

Over the next month, let me invite you to come on a road trip to Bethlehem with Vestavia Hills Baptist Church. This journey will prepare you for Christmas - the arrival of Jesus, the Light of the World. Over the four weeks of Advent, we will journey together in worship - week after week - making our way to the stable.

Like all road trips, we need a good map and GPS to arrive at our destination. This Advent Worship Guide will lead you towards the five destinations of Advent - **hope, peace, joy, love, and Christ!** Enter each day in wonder and openness to see what amazing discoveries you might make on your journey to Bethlehem.



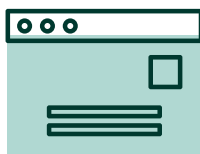
## How to use this Worship Guide

Each week begins with a theme interpretation written by one of our sacred partners (members). Take time on Sunday to read the focus passage and learn from the author's insights on the week's theme.

Each day of the week (Monday-Friday) offers worship prompts. Worship prompts are short, action-oriented spiritual practices which allow the week's theme to settle into your life. Read these few sentences in the morning and allow them to center your thinking, action, and worship throughout the day.



Scan the code to find links for all things Advent at VHBC!



An online version is available at [www.vhbc.com/advent-at-vhbc](http://www.vhbc.com/advent-at-vhbc)



There is more than the written word. Download the Advent Worship Guide Podcast today to hear the author read the week's focus passage and theme interpretation.



You can hear each week's music selection on Apple Music, Spotify, or YouTube.

# Advent Worship Events at VHBC

**SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 27**

10:00 AM Hanging of the Green

**SUNDAY, DECEMBER 4**

10:00 AM Sanctuary Choir Presents  
"New Life, New Hope, New Joy!"

**SUNDAY, DECEMBER 11**

10:00 AM Children's Choirs  
Share in Worship

**SUNDAY, DECEMBER 18**

10:00 AM Handbells Lead in Worship

4:00 PM Service of Consolation

**SATURDAY, DECEMBER 24**

4:30 PM Come See the Baby

A Worship Experience for Families with Children

8:00 PM Candlelight Christmas Eve  
Service

**SUNDAY, DECEMBER 25**

10:00 AM Christmas Day Worship



# Advent Guide Contributors



## JESS NIX

Attorney  
VHBC sacred partner since 2011.



## MICHAEL WILSON

Retired Director of the Center for  
Congregational Resources at  
Samford University.  
VHBC sacred partner since 2006.



## BECKY WHITE

Transportation planner and Senior  
Principal at Sain Associates, Inc.  
VHBC sacred partner since 1988.



## MARY GRACE COX

Registered Nurse  
VHBC sacred partner since 1999.



## MILBURN PRICE

Retired Dean of the School of  
Music/School of the Performing Arts  
at Samford University.  
VHBC sacred partner since 1994.

# Week 1 NOV 27 - DEC 3

## Journey Towards Hope

Author: Jess Nix

Focus Passage: Luke 1:39-56

Our journey to Bethlehem naturally begins with Mary and with the hope that her unborn son would represent for her and the world. Our focus passage captures the story of a pregnant Mary visiting her cousin, Elizabeth, who is pregnant with John the Baptist. Luke frames this visit and captures the essence of Christian hope in verse 37 when he writes, "For no word from God will ever fail," which one translation renders "For nothing will be impossible with God." Indeed, the expectation, excitement, and hope of the two women based upon their convictions that God could overcome any impossibility run through the entirety of the passage.

Further, God brought the two women together so they could encourage and strengthen one another. Luke 1:29 recounts that Mary was "greatly troubled" when the angel Gabriel called her "highly favored" and told her that the Lord would be with her. Gabriel then tells Mary that Jesus would be her son and that Elizabeth was six months pregnant with a child. Luke recounts that Mary "got ready and hurried" to Elizabeth's house.

Elizabeth was the perfect companion for Mary. The two women's pregnancies represent the fulfillment of different hopes in their lives. In both instances, God overcame impossible circumstances to fulfill the hopes of Elizabeth and Mary.

While Luke recounts that Mary was troubled by the news of her pregnancy, Elizabeth's excitement at both of their circumstances leaps off the page. Luke tells us, upon Mary's arrival, Elizabeth "in a loud voice" blesses Mary and Jesus, calls herself favored because Mary was visiting her, and tells Mary that her greeting caused John to leap in her womb. Having raised Mary's spirits, Elizabeth then tells her she is blessed if she believes what God has spoken about her. Elizabeth tells Mary that blessed is she whose hope is in the Lord.

Elizabeth's cheering had its intended effect. Mary breaks into a song of praise and hope, a song so powerful and beautiful that it has been known for centuries as the "Magnificat." The movement of the song is breathtaking. It begins with Mary's hope for what God is going to do through her, moves to her praise for God's divine justice that will overcome earthly inequities, and closes with her hope that God is remembering his ancestral promises to Abraham. The song demonstrates Mary's heart has been cheered and her hope renewed. She embraces the message and the hope that it represents for the future of the world.

Mary's visit with Elizabeth reminds us of the infectious nature of hope both in how it spreads from one person to another and how it grows in scope and size. Just like the kingdom of heaven, hope is like yeast that when mixed with flour spreads throughout the entire dough. Luke leave no doubt Elizabeth's excitement at her hope of a child being realized spread to a young, unsure Mary. Mary stays with Elizabeth for three months. Those three months are Mary's preparation for her journey to Bethlehem and the events that will follow. Mary draws upon them at later times when she again finds herself troubled or confused. We can draw on their example as we begin our journey to Bethlehem this Advent season.



# Worship Prompts



MON

**Listen to "O Little Town of Bethlehem."**

[Scan the QR code to find a recording or use your own favorite.] Pay particular attention to the phrase "No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in." With brokenness and sin all around, how will you receive the hope-filled gift of Christ's presence today?

TUE

Use this breath prayer to begin your personal preparation for the birth of Jesus.

[Pray a short phrase while breathing - one half on an inhale and one half on an exhale. Repeat the prayer at your own pace for a minute or two, mindful of your breath and your words. Use throughout the day.]

**Inhale: Emmanuel, God with us**

**Exhale: Prepare my heart.**

WED

**Read Luke 1:39-56.**

Imagine being in a room as Elizabeth welcomes Mary into her home. In a journal or on your phone, describe what hope looks like in this reception. Describe what hope looks like for you this Christmas.

THU

**Read the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13.**

Choose one phrase from this prayer (Thy Kingdom come, etc.) to be your hope practice today. Set a timer to remind you to pause each hour to pray this phrase during the day. Claim this prayer as your hope for the day.

FRI

**Bringing hope to my neighbor.**

Take a moment to let your mind be still and ask God to reveal the name of someone that needs hope this Advent season. Pray for this person and make personal contact by phone call, text, or note.

# Week 2 DEC 4 - DEC 10

## Journey Towards Peace

Author: Michael Wilson

Focus Passage: Luke 1:68-79

Today, we light the second purple candle in our Advent wreath during this Sunday's worship. Called the Candle of Peace, it invites us to consider how Jesus of Bethlehem illuminates a pathway toward peace for each of us. Along with lighting the Candle of Peace, we will participate in a recent addition to our church's worship: the Passing of the Peace. You are familiar with the words we say: "The peace of Christ be with you," we offer to a person near us. In turn that person replies, "And also with you." The Passing of the Peace is more than a convenient way to encourage us to be friendly and welcoming to those around us. The phrasing had its beginnings centuries ago in early Christian liturgical practice. Jesus was fond of the greeting "Peace be with you!" and the gospel writers recall many times when he used the greeting with his disciples. Incorporating the greeting/blessing in our worship connects us with generations of Christians who came before us. When we pass the peace, we are reminded Jesus came to bring peace and we, too, can know this peace, the peace of Christ. Yet, what do these words mean?

**If asked to define what is meant by the word peace, how might you respond? What about the peace of Christ? Have the words become so familiar that opportunities are missed to ponder their meaning for our lives?**

---

The New Testament word for peace is a Greek word comparable to the Hebrew word for peace, which is the word **shalom**. The word is used 100 times in the New Testament, with most occurring in the writings of Paul, Luke's gospel, and the book of Acts. The word communicates wholeness, well-being, restored relationships, and freedom from fear. When Jesus offered his greeting, "Peace be with you!" the idea of **shalom** was being communicated. In John's gospel, Jesus offered this greeting to his disciples multiple times following his death and resurrection. No doubt those were unsettling days for Jesus' closest followers. A sense of peace about what had happened and what might yet happen was nowhere to be found among many of his disciples. Jesus knew this when he offered his greeting. Peace was the first thing he said---the first thing he offered his anxious disciples.

The word **peace** implies something abstract, something that we cannot touch but can feel. In like manner, so are the words **love, kindness, hope, compassion, and joy**. They represent something real, but not tangible. Their meaning connects to us at the level of the heart, not the head or intellect. We can understand that a mile represents a finite measure of distance because we can see a mile from beginning to end. However, our minds cannot process the distance of far-flung galaxies like those recently imaged with brilliant clarity by the Webb Space Telescope. The distance is too great to comprehend with the mind, even with the imagination. We are left with an opportunity to welcome powerful feelings of wonder and awe and a growing awareness of mystery about God's ongoing creative activity. Truly, the Psalmist's words can resonate with us: "When I consider the heavens, what is human kind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?"

Might the peace Jesus offers be like this? We navigate paths that seem full of twists and turns, potholes, and hazards. We encounter unsettling circumstances. Our journeys may even lack a clear destination, even as we are compelled to be on a path toward something or somewhere. Though our heads may question why we make these journeys, our hearts tell us to welcome them. We know them to be new adventures in the mystery and wonder of the Holy One's creative activity.

**The peace of Christ helps us have the motivating, energizing awareness that we are not lost. We need not be anxious or afraid. There is One who guides our feet.**

May the peace of Christ free us to journey without fear on unfamiliar paths, eager for God's new creation unfolding before us.



# Worship Prompts



MON

Listen to "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing."  
Scan the QR code to find a recording or use your own favorite. The final stanza in most hymnals starts "Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace! Hail the Sun of Righteousness! Light and life to all He brings, risen with healing in His wings." The Prince of Peace comes to heal and make whole: **shalom**. Where do you need the peace of Jesus most today?

TUE

Use this breath prayer to claim God's peace experienced through the birth and life of Jesus Christ.

**Inhale: The Prince of Peace has come**  
**Exhale: Glory to God!**

WED

**Read Luke 1:68-79**  
reflect on these questions: Where is God guiding your feet in the way of peace this Advent? What does the way of peace look like in your life?

THU

**Name a fear you have carried into this Advent season.**  
As you say the fear aloud, speak the Hebrew word **shalom** (peace, wholeness, redemption) immediately afterwards. As this fear rises in your life today, speak God's Shalom as a reminder of God's peace alive in you.

FRI

**Sharing Peace with my neighbor.**  
As you drive through your neighborhood or take your daily walk, pray God's peace over your neighbors' homes and families as you pass their doors. Ask God to remind you to pray for neighborhoods and families around the world where peace is not present.

# Week 3 DEC 11 - 17

## **Journey Towards Joy**

Author: Becky White

Focus Passage: John 15:5-17

This may seem an odd text for an Advent devotion. Most of us would say Advent is supposed to be about joyful anticipation of the Savior's birth. John 15:5-17 is placed in John's gospel immediately after the last supper and is part of Jesus' farewell words to his disciples. An emotional farewell may not be what we have in mind during the Christmas season, but these last words help us better understand why we celebrate Jesus' birth. In this text, Jesus describes the true source of joy and how we can cultivate it throughout our lives.

Two themes run through this text that were familiar to Jews in Jesus' lifetime. The metaphor of a vineyard or grapevine was often used to represent Israel. In the Old Testament, Israel is pictured as a vine that was brought out of Egypt by God, planted in a new land, but often failed to produce the good fruit that God expected. In John 15, Jesus tells his disciples that he, not Israel, is the true vine. Their connection to God is no longer through their group identity but through Christ who is accessible to all people.

Joy was part of the ritual life of the Jewish community, openly encouraged and expressed in religious celebrations as an outward sign of gratitude and connection to God. Through the birth of Jesus, the God of joy came to earth as a human being, making his joy available to all. In Luke 2:8-12 the angel said "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people."

Jesus says true and lasting joy comes from living a life constantly connected to him like branches connected to a grapevine. The connection is mutual; if we remain in him, he remains in us, and our lives will produce fruit for God's glory. We were chosen for joy, but we have a choice. Jesus wants us to understand we can do nothing of eternal value without the connection to him. That connection requires obedience, a conscious acceptance of the authority of God's teaching and open communication through prayer. Staying connected to God may sound mystical and hard to do, but theologian William Barclay suggested we think of it as staying in contact with a friend whose positive influence brings out the best in us.

Why has he chosen us for a life of joy? That choosing comes from God's abundant love for us and desire that we love one another. Jesus says to the disciples, he loves us as the Father has loved him. That love is intimate, never ending, immeasurable, and unchanging. Just as we were chosen for a life of joy, we were chosen to be vessels of love.

When Christmas carols are being sung and we reflect again on the birth of a tiny baby who will change the world, a joyful spirit and heart full of love may seem easy.

**But loving one another is not a seasonal job. Consistent loving makes close connection to the source of a love that calls us into an intimate relationship.**

As you focus on the gift of joy this week, think about your connection to Christ, the true vine. Are you drawing your strength from him, and is that life force being expressed in loving actions? He came to invite us into a life of joy and show us how to experience it. Thanks be to God!

# Worship Prompts



MON

**Listen to "Joy to the World! The Lord is Come."** As we prepare room for Jesus, "heaven and nature sing" of the joy of the Advent King. Only in our imagination can we hear the song of heaven but open your heart and mind to hear nature singing of the joy that comes to us through Jesus.

TUE

Use this breath prayer to remind you of the joy we claim with Christ's coming.

**Inhale: God of Good News**  
**Exhale: Fill me with joy.**

WED

**Read John 15:5-17**

Reflect on the connection between abiding Jesus, the true vine, and God's joy in us. Describe a moment when you have experienced God's joy. Name one way you can abide in Jesus today.

THU

**Today, keep your eyes and ears open for joy around you.**

Where do you hear joy in your family, friends, or co-workers? Where do you see joy in people's lives, vocation, or action? Give thanks to God for the joy you see.

FRI

**Sharing Joy with my neighbor.**

How are you being the presence of Christ and sharing His joy to those in your purview? Set a time to reflect on those around you and who might need the joy of Jesus and the presence of a friend during this Advent season. Then go and share joy with your neighbor!



# Week 4 DEC 18 - 24

## **Journey Towards Love**

**Author: Mary Grace Cox**

**Focus Passage: 1 Corinthians 13**

As we draw nearer to Christmas, we prepare our hearts and minds to take in the meaning of Jesus' birth as followers of Christ. There is a growing stillness amid preparation in this season; a soft glow around the mundane. As we collectively prepare as a congregation this week, we light the Advent candle of Love.

First and Second Corinthians represent letters that Paul writes to the people of Corinth, seeking to heal a divided church that he himself planted. He issues warnings against idolatry, sexual immorality, and many other significant topics at the top of minds and hearts of the Corinthians. He offers wisdom about spiritual gifts and how the Corinthians might form a stronger body of believers by recognizing these spiritual gifts in themselves and each other. Paul laid a foundation for a strong church and used these letters to further nurture and course-correct this new body of believers. The people of Corinth held firmly to the rules, laws, and outwardly seen gifts they could bring to the Church. Paul affirmed these statutes, meeting the Corinthians where they are, but then introduced a new concept in First Corinthians, Chapter 13: without love, all these things are nothing.

Paul writes about this love for the Corinthians, not despite the instructions he has just provided, but in harmony with it. These gifts and signs of obedience are beautiful acts of building Church together.

However, without love, Paul insists that it is all just noise. While Chapter 13 is poetic enough to be used as an anthem for wedding ceremonies, it was written as a call to action for a struggling church body. Today, it remains a message for a world that desperately needs to hear it: that the greatest of these is love.

There are several words for love in the Greek language. Paul specifically chose to use agape. This love given out of pure grace has little to do with emotion. It is the denial of oneself for the sake of another. God set in motion this act of agape love after centuries of earthly rulers, so that we might understand more fully the change that was coming - the love that manifested itself as the birth of a tiny baby, sent to save the world from its sins.

Agape is a love witnessed in the book of Luke, leading up to the birth of Jesus, as Mary and Joseph heard, accepted, and journeyed toward the call Gabriel brought to Mary. Her response was an act of love: "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). It is love in action - love as a new creation. The Christmas story is covered in agape love that offers a different path for followers of Christ. The corners of our hearts were made to unfold, to offer and accept the love created from Jesus' life, starting with his humble birth among farm animals and hay. We are entrusted to act as practitioners of this love, learning what it is and what it is not, getting it wrong so many times before we can come close to getting it right. As we love each other, because and despite who we are, we play out the Christmas story repeatedly, carrying out the love that was modeled for us thousands of years ago through the events that led to the birth of a baby in a manger.

**May the love of Christ propel us into action.**

# Worship Prompts



**MON**

**Listen to "Love Came Down at Christmas."**

Meditate on the incarnate, divine love that comes to each of us in the birth of Jesus. Center your thoughts on "love to God and others" that we know most fully through Christ.

**TUE**

Use this breath prayer to practice being light to the world.

**Inhale: Let Your light  
Exhale: Shine through me.**

**WED**

**Read 1 Corinthians 13.**

What Gospel story of Jesus comes to mind as you read Paul's description of agape (love)? Name one aspect of the agape of Jesus you desire for your life today?

**THU**

**Look for signs of God's love (agape) today** in the world around you (patient, kind, humble, sacrificial, etc.). Give thanks to God for each person, story, or carol which reflects God's love for you.

**FRI**

**Look for opportunities to show love to our neighbors.**

Gather your family and decide how you might lovingly serve others with the Love of Jesus this Advent season. Rake a neighbor's leaves, support a local mission agency through offering our time, serve a meal to those in need, etc. Let us model God's love and let our love for others be experienced in real and tangible ways.

# christmas day **DEC 25**

## **Christ Has Arrived**

Author: Milburn Price

Focus Passage: Isaiah 9:2

It is Christmas day! On this day we celebrate the birth over two thousand years ago of a baby boy to his earthly parents; Mary and Joseph, who gave him the name Jesus. As John's gospel describes that event, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling with us" (John 1:14). Over the following years this baby would grow to adulthood and, because of his teaching and ministry, would be addressed and referred to by a variety of titles and metaphors, including Lord, Master, Savior, Prince of Peace, and Son of God. However, during this Christmas season, the metaphor that is particularly intriguing to me is "Light of the world."

**In ancient times the people yearned,  
in darkness as the night,  
to see the prophecy fulfilled—  
the coming of the Light.**

For generations before the birth of Jesus, Hebrew people of faith had awaited and anticipated the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah: "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned" (Isaiah 9:2). It is not coincidental that, in the account of Jesus' healing of a man who had been blind from birth recorded in the ninth chapter of John's gospel, Jesus referred to himself as "the light of the world" (John 9:5).

During the Christmas season each year, we see all around us a profusion of lights. They decorate our Christmas trees, our homes, our streets, our business establishments, and our malls. Could it be that, amid the commercialization that has developed around the Christmas season, these lights are intended to remind us subconsciously that the season is not about presents or parties, but about “the Light of the world”?

O gladsome Light, O Grace,  
reflective of the Father’s face,  
th’eternal splendor wearing;  
celestial, holy, blest,  
our Savior, Jesus Christ,  
joyful in Thine appearing.



Anonymous 3rd century text,  
trans. Robert Bridges

As you experience this year’s Christmastide, how is your vision? Are there any dark corners in your life that need to be illuminated? Are there any aspects of your life that need more light? If so, this season would be the perfect time to allow the Light of Christ to provide both greater insight and clearer foresight.

The whole world was lost in the darkness of sin,  
the Light of the world is Jesus!  
Like sunshine at noonday His glory shone in;  
the Light of the world is Jesus!  
Come to the Light, ‘tis shining for thee;  
sweetly the Light has dawned upon me.  
Once I was blind, but now I can see:  
the Light of the world is Jesus!

Hymn text by Philip P. Bass

# A Prayer for Christmas Day

Gracious God, on this Christmas day of 2022 may the Light of Christ illumine our hearts and minds so that we renew our faith commitments for the sake of ourselves, our families, our church, and your kingdom.

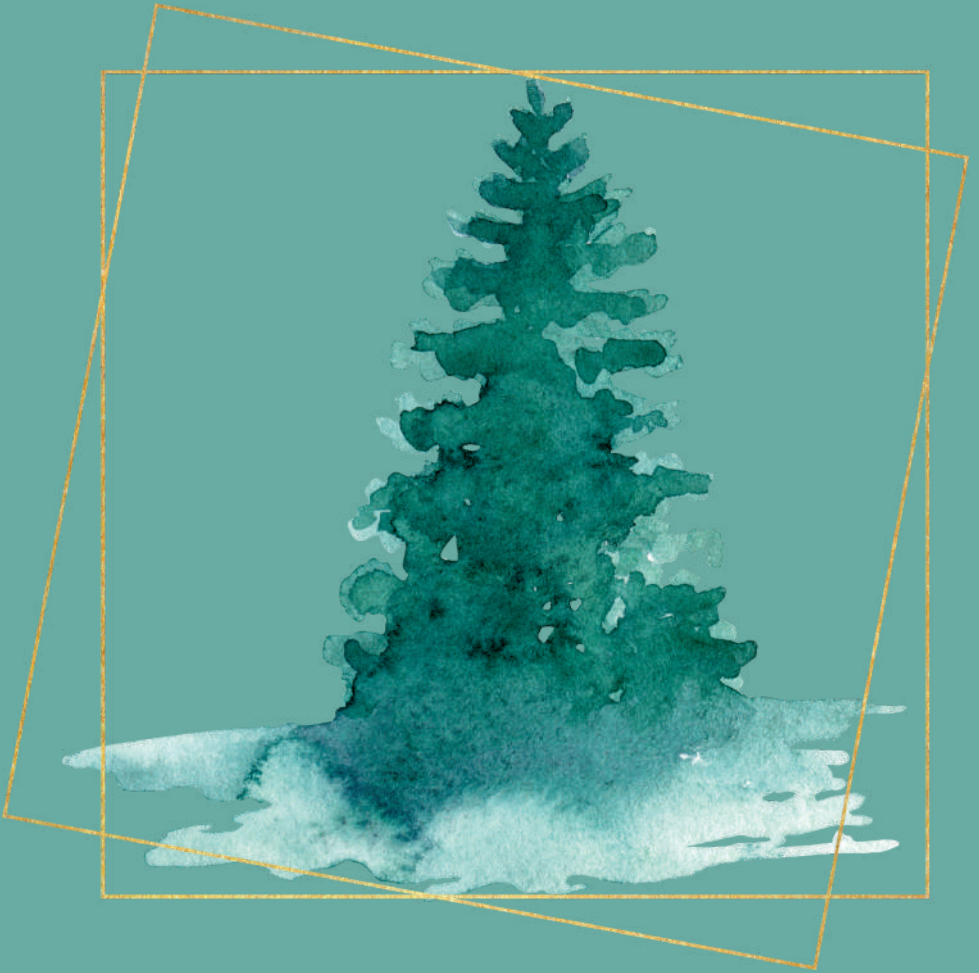
Meditation written by Milburn Price

## Listen to

"Silent Night, Holy Night."

Focus on the phrase "Son of God, love's pure light." Celebrate the "dawn of redeeming grace" that comes to us in the birth of Jesus.





Vestavia Hills Baptist Church

2600 Vestavia Dr.

Vestavia Hills, AL 35216