



Middlesettlements UMC 2021 Advent Devotional

Contributors:

Betsy Aeschliman
Cindy Alloway
Juanita Brown (1990)
Mable Love Brown (1993)
Nancy Brown (1990)
Brenda Clemens
Brenda Crisp
Rev. Jason Gattis
Linda Hearon
Dora Hooks
Chris Keylon
Julia Keylon
Karen Lewis
Joyce Overton
Kathy Puckett
Neil Rhodes
Rev. Jason Roe
June Love Shaw
Rev. Magan Stubblefield
Robin Turnmire
Rev. Dr. Debra Wallace-Padgett
David Wells
& The Little Way Chapel

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge—God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Cover Art:

Nativity by John August Swanson, 2016

Introduction

The Church has its own calendar—its own way of organizing time around the stories of scripture. There are holy days (holi-days) and seasons, times of remembering and celebrating, days of feasting or fasting and repenting. Each of those days and seasons helps us tell the story of God, helping us love Him with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. These days and seasons of remembering God’s story are called the Liturgical Year and it begins every year with the season of Advent—the time we’re in now. The word Advent means “coming” or “arrival”—and the season of Advent is a time of looking forward to the advent of Jesus. The time of Advent invites us to remember how Jesus has come to us before—how as a baby “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us”—and how Jesus will someday come again in glory.

Advent for an Easter people is a strange season. Having not grown up with the season of Advent, I remember the first time I attended a church where month-long waiting and hoping led to Christmas Day. It was beautiful, but also strange. Am I pretending I don’t know Jesus has already come, both to the manger and the cross? Am I supposed to be reliving the hopes of Israel for a Messiah? What am I meant to do during Advent?

Over time I have realized I am waiting and hoping for more than Christmas. In commemorating a season that celebrates God-with-us, I am also remembering that God does come to us. Jesus has dwelt among us and the Spirit currently dwells in us, joining us to the Father and to one another. But even this presence is a foreshadowing, a taste, of what is to come. We await “the blessed hope” and “manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.”

While we wait and hope, there is much to be done. Jesus came, bringing salvation, and training us how to live now. We are to live in a certain way: the way of the people of God. We live in gratefulness, remembering our salvation as a gift from God. We remember that Christ has made us his own and that we are to live like him. It can sound a little boring at first, especially during the holiday-frenzy of December. But these are ways of life that not only help us be free, but also offer us joy, peace, hope, love, patience, kindness, and more. We have been given a life that is more than the allure of the mall and commercials or anything else this world can offer.

MUMC’s 2021 Advent Devotional reflects on all these things and more—(many thanks to all who contributed, edited, produced, and distributed!). As always, I’m grateful for this devotion that encourages me in my personal prayer time, challenges me in my discipleship journey, and binds me together with my church family.

A few notes about MUMC’s 2021 Advent Devotional that you might find helpful as you begin:

- Daily readings include scripture, reflections, and a prayer. Take time to read these each day, if possible at around the same time. If you don’t already have a daily quiet time, this can give you the “kick-start” you need to make it a regular practice. You may want to have a pen and/or paper to journal your own prayer/response to the daily scriptures/ reflections.

- Every Thursday has a “throwback” entry from a previous MUMC Devotional. Enjoy reading the wisdom of some of the MUMC Saints who have now joined the Church Triumphant!
- Every Sunday has readings for the day as well as ways to observe the season at home. This may be new to you—but surrounding your home, ways, and even meals with discipleship can only be a good thing!
- Our first Sunday has readings listed for you to keep an Advent Wreath at home, as well as prayers you can pray as a family each week during Advent (we’ll give you the Christmas ones on the Christmastide page later!). If you don’t have your own wreath, it’s simple to “make do” by putting out 5 candles of any size, color, or kind. You can put them in a row or in a circle (like a wreath). If you’re feeling dedicated, you can keep to tradition and use 3 purple candles, 1 pink, and one white. The purple symbolizes the royalty of the coming Messiah. ; the “rose” candle represents the joy we feel as Christmas draws near; the white candle (the “Christ Candle”) is lit during Christmastide to represent Jesus. *Set up your Advent wreath in a central location, like the dinner table or the coffee table. Light candles while gathered for meals or your devotions.*

May this Advent & Christmas be a blessing to you, teaching you to follow and desire Jesus in every corner of your life and home.

God bless you!
Pastor Magan

November 28

1st Sunday in Advent

"Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD"

Psalm 27:14

Prayer for Illumination:¹ Make us to know your ways, O Lord; teach us your paths. Lead us in your truth, for you are the God of our salvation; for you we wait all day long. Amen.

Read Isaiah 2:1-5

This is what Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem: In the last days the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as the highest of the mountains; it will be exalted above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths." The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. Come, descendants of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the LORD.

Read Romans 13:11-14

And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing & drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.

Read Matthew 24:36-44

But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

Closing Prayer: Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. *Amen.*²

¹ Prayers of Illumination are offered to help us pay attention to what God has said in scripture. May God bless your reading of His word!

² Collect for the First Sunday in Advent, Book of Common Prayer (1979)

Living Liturgically

☞ *all throughout Advent* ☞

1st Week of Advent Meal Blessing³

O Lord, Our God, help us to prepare for the coming of Christ, your Son. When he comes, may he find us eagerly awaiting him. Send your blessing upon this table and all those who share in this meal. This we ask through Christ, our Lord. Amen

2nd Week of Advent Meal Blessing

A voice cries out in the desert:
"Prepare the way of the Lord."

Make straight the paths for our God.

Praise be to you, God of salvation, for you have sent John the Baptist and the prophets to prepare the way for Christ. Open our hearts to the joy of Christ's coming, and may this meal be eaten in anticipation of the heavenly banquet as we await with hope the blessed coming of our Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

3rd Week of Advent Meal Blessing

Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of David, and radiant star of morning, come and dispel the darkness of our night. Look with mercy upon us who await your coming. Give us our daily bread and grant us the grace to share in the eternal banquet of your kingdom. Amen

4th Week of Advent Meal Blessing

Behold, the time of our salvation is at hand, for the Virgin approaches to give birth to her Son.

Be glad and rejoice, O Bethlehem, for from you the Lord shall shine forth as the dawn.

Blessed be you, Lord Jesus Christ, you see the need we have of your saving help. You come to visit us to heal all our wounds. Grant your blessings on this food prepared for our nourishment, and may we find consolation in your forthcoming visitation. Amen.

Advent Wreath At-Home Readings

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world; the one who follows me will not walk in darkness but have the light of life."

We light this candle as a sign of the coming light of Christ.

First Advent Candle: A Reading from the Word of the Lord
Praise be to the Lord, for he has looked favorably on his people. By the tender mercy of our God, the rising sun will come to us from heaven, to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

—Luke 1:68, 78-79

Second Advent Candle: A Reading from the Word of the Lord
By the tender mercy of our God, the rising sun will come to us from heaven, to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death. Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come to save you."

—Luke 1:78-79; Isaiah 35:3-4

Third Advent Candle: A Reading from the Word of the Lord
(Second Reading) + "Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And he will be our peace."

—Isaiah 7:14; Micah 4:4-5a

Fourth Advent Candle: A Reading from the Word of the Lord
By the tender mercy of our God, the rising sun will come to us from heaven, to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death. Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come to save you." Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. He will be our peace. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.

—Luke 1:78-79; Isaiah 35:3-4, 7:14, 9:6b-7; Micah 4:4-5a

Come, Lord Jesus, our light and our salvation.

Let us walk in the light of the Lord.

Musical Response

to the tune of "O Come All Ye Faithful"

True God of true God, Light from Light Eternal,
lo, He shuns not the Virgin's womb;
Son of the Father, begotten, not created;
O come, let us adore him, O come, let us adore him,
O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord.

³ Adapted from the Advent Blessings in *Blessings of the Table: Mealtime Prayers Throughout the Year* by Brother Victor-Antoine d'Avile-Latourrette.

November 29

Betsy Aeschliman, MUMC Supported Missionary

Read Luke 1:30-33

And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His Kingdom there will be no end."

Approaching Christmas 2021 in a second full year of Covid-challenges, limitations and griefs, we believers – chosen, rescued saints – all of us need the promise given to Mary that God's Kingdom will never end. Moreover, it will yet *prevail* over anything with which we are confronted by a fallen world, the Tormentor or our sin-natures since we live – dwell, abide – under the Providence of a gracious Father.

I grasp this truth only by Holy Spirit helping me claim it in faith – a weak faith at times, like the Father in Mark, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" (9:24b)

I remember a Sunday School teacher telling me as a young girl, "Nothing can touch you through God's fingers of love, except He permit it, as He holds you in the palms of His hands" ...kind of like being snugly-protected under the shadow of His wings. (Psalms 17:8, 61:4, 63:7, 91:4)

I imagine Mary felt her faith to be weak at times and needed to "feel the feathers", too ...just imagine being told you were carrying God's Son – the long-awaited Messiah – in your womb!

But we *have* the Light – Jesus' first Advent *did* take place in a Bethlehem manger, and we now anticipate with joy His *second* Advent in the Father's timing, although only imagining what it will be like.

Before Dietrich Bonhoeffer's martyrdom, he wrote, "And then, just when everything is bearing down on us to such an extent that we can scarcely withstand it, the Christmas message comes to tell us that all our ideas are wrong, and that what we take to be evil and dark is really good and light because it comes from God. Our eyes are at fault, that is all. God is in the manger; we have wealth in poverty, light in darkness, succor in abandonment. No evil can befall us; whatever men may do to us, they cannot but serve the God who is secretly revealed as love and rules the world and our lives." [God Is in the Manger: Reflections on Advent and Christmas](#)

Oh, long-awaited but-here and-coming-again Jesus! 🎵"The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight." 🎵

Pray: Abba Father, thank You for sending Your Son to save us, for Your guiding, comforting, exhorting and sustaining written Word, and for the fellowship of the saints, especially at this time of year. Holy Spirit, sanctify and guard our hearts so as to be centered in - wholly confident of - the Light of the World. Jesus, Light of the World and Who will come again, help us not to fear either. Grant us measures of ever-increasing faith in this Advent Season and all the rest of our days. Help us to tell others who are waiting to know and trust You that they, too, can experience Advent in their hearts. Amen.

Memorable Christmases

Read Titus 2:11-14

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

The Christmas Eve service has been a tradition in our family for as long as I can remember. It is very important to me. Last year, when it snowed I was so sad that our service was cancelled. I was determined to go to a service. We loaded up and headed out and found a service to attend. Maybe it wasn't the best decision and maybe it wasn't the safest decision but I was so overjoyed to worship and prepare for the coming of Christ with my family.

My Dad was one that you couldn't look at if you were trying to be serious or keep a straight face. His laugh and smile were contagious! He could ALWAYS take a serious or sad situation and make it lighter or funny. Around 30 years ago, we had a Christmas service at our church and I was sitting with my family. My Dad was "resting his eyes" as he preached about Joseph knocking on the door of the Inn asking if there was room. Then, he went on to make the connection that God is "knocking" on our heart and wants to come in. The pastor started knocking loudly on the pulpit and it not only woke up my Dad but it startled him! He quickly turned to look at the back door to see who was knocking. Then he looked at me to see if I noticed what happened, and when he noticed I did we started to laugh. It was bad and it was VERY hard not to cause a scene. My Mom gave us both the "straighten up quickly" look. We tried not to look at each other and Dad started trying to read the hymnal to get his mind focused on something else. My mom and I still laugh about this special Christmas memory.

Most families have many traditions, old and new, to help prepare for the coming of Christ. Some are meant to be serious and others are more fun and light hearted. This Christmas season TAKE the time to prepare for the coming of Christ. Take the time to read the scriptures, pray and worship. This is more important than the shopping, parties and food! Remember God is knocking!

Pray: Dear God, Thank you for continuing to knock and pursue us even when we are distracted and focused on other things or "asleep." Above all, thank you for sending your son! Help us to be prepared for his coming. Amen.

Words of Comfort

Read Isaiah 40:1-11

“Comfort, yes, comfort My people!” Says our God. Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her, that her warfare is ended. That her iniquity is pardoned. For she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.” The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord; Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight and the rough places smooth; The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together; For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” The voice said, “Cry out!” And he said, “What shall I cry?” “All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, and the flower fades because the breath of the Lord blows upon it; Surely the people are grass, the grass withers, and the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever.” O Zion, You who bring good tidings, get up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, you who bring good tidings, Lift up your voice with strength, Lift it up, be not afraid; Say to the cities of Judah, “Behold your God!” Behold, the Lord God shall come with a strong hand, and His arm shall rule for Him; Behold His reward is with Him, and His work before Him. He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His heart, and gently lead those who are with young.

Three Meanings of Advent:

1. The coming or foretelling of Jesus birth
2. Jesus coming into our hearts through the Holy Spirit
3. Thankfulness and preparing our hearts and celebrating the future for the return of Jesus.

In this scripture, Isaiah is speaking to Jerusalem about the third meaning of Advent. In chapter 40 verses 1-11, God tells Isaiah to speak tenderly and comfort Jerusalem. He speaks of events that will occur after the captivity and their return to Jerusalem. Isaiah also tells of the coming of Jesus and of the new heavens and earth when God’s people will be restored. He instructs them to “make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” Preparing a straight highway simply means removing any obstacles and rolling out the red carpet for the Lord. In verses 7 & 8, people are compared to grass and flowers that wither away, and this reminds us that we are mortal, but God’s word is eternal and unending. Finally, in the last verse, (v. 11) God is pictured as a shepherd who will gently care for his flock and the most defenseless members of His society. The theme of this passage of scripture reinforces the idea that “the truly powerful nation is not the one with the strong military, but rather the one that relies on God’s caring strength.” (NIV)

As I sat in the pew on All Saints’ Day a few Sundays ago, I began remembering many of my family members and friends that had passed away just this past year and recalling all the struggles and adversities that this year has brought. Some loved ones died from illnesses, and yet others died from the pandemic - and age wasn’t necessarily a factor. This year has certainly been anything but a “straight path” for many people. While studying for this Advent scripture, I ran across this comment in the notes section of the NIV bible. It said,

“The seeds of comfort may take root in the soil of adversity.” This thought provoking phrase certainly applies to our lives as Christians. When life seems to be falling apart, ask God to comfort you. You may not escape adversity, but you will find God’s comfort as you face it. Sometimes however, the only comfort we have is in the knowledge that someday we will be with God. As we begin this Advent season, appreciate the comfort and encouragement found in His word, His presence, and His people.

Pray: “God of compassion, you suffer in the grief of your people, and you are present to heal and forgive. May the sun of your justice rise on every night of oppression, and may the warm rays of your healing love renew and comfort each troubled mind; for you are the God of salvation and new life, made known to us in Jesus Christ our Lord.”⁴ Amen.

⁴ From Steven Manskar, director of Wesleyan Leadership at Disciples Ministries

December 2

Rev. Dr. Debra Wallace-Padgett, Bishop of Holston & N. Alabama Conferences
2016 Bishop's Advent Message

Advent Yeasting

Read Luke 1:5-25

In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old. Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time." Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak. When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."

I have a delicious, no fail, sourdough bread recipe! It involves a three-step process spread over 1½ days. The key to the recipe is to give the bread dough time to "yeast" – Sue Monk Kidd's word for allowing bread to rise.

Kidd tells of making the bread with the assistance of her five year old daughter, Ann. When they got to the part of adding yeast and covering the dough with a dishcloth so that it would rise, little Ann wrinkled her brow and asked, "Aren't you going to finish?" "We have to wait for the dough to rise," explained her mother. "Well, how long do we have to wait?" responded Ann. "An hour," answered her mother. "A WHOLE hour?" the little girl grimaced and plopped in her chair to wait it out, occasionally lifting the cloth to peek at the dough. "It's not doing anything," she announced. Her Mom replied, "You can't see it, but the yeast is working. I promise." Unconvinced, Ann wandered off to play. Toward the end of the hour

she returned to peer into the bowl. Her face lit up. "Look, Mama, it's yeasting!" she proclaimed. (Pages 42 and 43, *When the Heart Waits* by Sue Monk Kidd)

Yeasting is a beautiful concept, not only in bread-making, but also in our spiritual lives. In fact, **Advent** could be called **a season of yeasting**. It is **a time when we wait** for God's word and work in our lives. Though much is happening while we yeast, we must wait patiently for the yeasting process to be completed.

What do we do while we yeast? The father-to-be Zechariah prays. (Luke 1:5-25) He and his wife, Elizabeth, have waited *so* long for a child that he has lost hope of their prayers ever being answered. He receives the surprise of a lifetime when the angel says, "Your prayer is heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son . . ." The yeasting process is completed and Zechariah's hope becomes reality.

Advent praying is essential for our Advent yeasting, too. Through the mystery of prayer, we talk to God about our concerns and joys. As we pray we hear from God, receiving direction, encouragement and strength. Most of us do not have the privilege of an angel coming and spelling God's plan out for us. But God still speaks to us through a variety of means. As we wait . . . as we yeast like Zechariah . . . we do well to pray.

We pray for forgiveness, changed hearts and transformed lives. We ask for strength for the day, courage in the face of injustice and generosity in our relationships with others. We lift up our loved ones, the sick, the hungry, those who do not yet know Christ, those who are persecuted for their faith. We pray for ourselves, each other, our church and our world.

But **prayer is so much more than making requests of God**. It involves waiting to hear God speak. It requires listening for God's response to requests. It means a willingness to hear God answer our heart's desires with a yes, a no, or with a wait and yeast.

During this Advent season, like Zechariah, we wait. We wait for God's comfort, direction, peace and justice in the world. We wait while the yeasting process works in our lives, churches and communities. The time will come when God calls us to act. In fact, if ever a response to God and others is demanded, it is at Christmas – which is only a few days away. But in the meantime, I find myself waiting, yeasting so to speak. And while I wait, my prayer life is full of talking and listening to God. For now, that seems like enough. **After all, it is Advent – the season of yeasting.**

Pray: Come, thou long-expected Jesus, born to set thy people free; from our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee. Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art; dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart.⁵

⁵ Prayer taken from "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus" by Charles Wesley, 1744

Simple & Grand Truth

Read Luke 2:10

Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.

Grand gestures, professionally shot engagement videos, choreographed flash mobs, all permeate current societal trends. While there is nothing wrong with over-the-top expressions of love, a subtle lie seems to have pervaded our culture: large public gestures equate with a grander love.

When Jesus was born over 2,000 years ago, the world was receiving the first chapter (after a pretty epic prologue) of the greatest love story ever told--the one movies, books and inward desires emulate and crave. The craziest thing? The reality of Jesus' birth proved less like extravagant fanfare and earthly symphonies and more like the classic song sung every year, "Silent Night, Holy Night..."

Silent.

Where is the choreographed dance of angels for the birth of the Savior? Why is there no big party for the One True King breathing His first?

Mary and Joseph were not lavished in praise and excitement as they brought God's Son into the world. They were turned away, rejected and likely tempted to doubt the importance of the very event an angel had foretold to them.

God shows time and time again that His love is grand, yet not in a way that paints a picture of shiny rainbows and easy living. God's love is expressed in the everyday mess. God's love lay manifest as a helpless baby, born of an unwed teenager, surrounded by a town that cares nothing for His birth. Wow.

This Advent season, join us in recapturing the power of God's love. Not for its quotable and "feel good" narrative, but for the simple and grand truth that God meets us where we are. God meets us in our failures, our triumphs, our addictions, our good days and our bad, saying, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people." (Luke 2:10).

Pray: Dear God, thank you for sending Jesus to be the Savior of the World. Help us to love like you. May we walk humbly with you as we celebrate your arrival. May you be blessed with our lives. Amen.

Preparations that Go Awry

Read Luke 2:1-6

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born...

I find it comforting that the church saints who set forth our calendar and seasons chose to begin our "year" with a season of preparation and waiting. Even children are all too familiar with the phrase, "Clean up your room before ____ gets here." As adults, that expectation extends to the bathroom, the kitchen, the living room, and maybe even the car if that special person is going to be riding with you back home. We want the clutter cleared, the dirt cleaned, and a pleasant smell to greet our guest. We want to have the right ingredients to make favorite dishes as a treat to show we care.

As we hustle and bustle for our holiday events, are we also preparing our hearts for the arrival of Christ the Anointed Messiah? Are we letting ourselves be where we are supposed to be? In these verses, I can only imagine the conversations which must have occurred between verses 3 and 4. Joseph is now faced with the difficulty of telling Mary that he has to go away by order of Caesar Augustus. Perhaps with Mary or others, he pondered and brainstormed ways to try to get around this, especially if Mary was saying she would go with him. That would be dangerous, ridiculous, and painful for her to try to ride a donkey that far! But of course, Joseph had to go or he faced severe punishment or death at the hands of the Romans. Somehow between the two of them, the decision was made that both would go. We are not told of any further divine dreams or instructions. We don't know if either of them recalled the prophecies about Bethlehem being the birthplace of the Redeemer and this being a way for God to accomplish what He had said would occur. We aren't sure if they talked to anyone about their decision, maybe receiving good or very bad advice. Scriptures don't tell us whether the local rabbi believed either of their stories that Mary's pregnancy is the long-awaited Messiah. There is no mention of anyone who helped them navigate this difficult decision and likely only silence in response to their prayers for wisdom. And yet - they arrived at the right place, at the right time, exactly according to God's plan. His call to Mary and Joseph required special preparations that seemed to be going awry when this order was made known. Traveling was very difficult, and it was quite unusual that a first-time mother would make not one but two trips during her pregnancy, with the second one being so close to when the baby would arrive. So who is in charge of your preparations this season? Is there room for God to place you where He wants you to be? Are you willing to let God mess with what you thought the plan was, even if He does so in some strange ways?

Pray: Precious Lord, take my hand. Lead me on, help me stand. I am tired. I am weak. I am worn. But we do seek You and long to follow You, no matter where You would lead us. Help us to be willing to step forward in the path You have set for us, even if You don't send us a divine sign that it is the right one. Lord, we believe; help our unbelief! Amen.

December 5

2nd Sunday in Advent

"Prepare the way for the LORD and the glory of the LORD will be revealed"

from Isaiah 40:3, 5

Prayer for Illumination: God of the universe, revealed to us in Holy Scripture through the writings of the prophets and the preaching of John the Baptist, you have called us to prepare our hearts for your visitation. Ready us now to hear your Word and to respond as faithful servants, to the glory of Christ. Amen.

Read Isaiah 11:1-10

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD—and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist. The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the cobra's den, and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious.

Read Romans 15:4-9a, 13

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope. May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Read Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" John's clothes were made of camel's hair and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. But when he saw many of the Pharisees & Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

Closing Prayer: Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*⁶

⁶ Collect for the Second Sunday in Advent, Book of Common Prayer (1979)

Living Liturgically

❧ the second week of Advent ❧

Setting the (Manger) Scene

If you've set out your manger scenes, consider

- 1) setting out only the stable and empty manger at first, reflecting on the fact that the son of God, the King of Kings...was born in a barn,
- 2) putting back the baby Jesus until 12/25 and
- 3) placing the Wise Men somewhere else in the house. In anticipation of the Epiphany (January 6th, when the Wise Men finally do meet Jesus), tradition has the Wise Men "journeying" through the house to meet Jesus. Have fun moving the Wise Men all over the place until they finally are able to present their gifts in January. If you've got children, it can be a game to "find" the Wise Men on their journey each day.

Making Room

Knowing that gifts might be soon making your way into the house, consider making room! Advent is a great time to clean out closets, toy boxes, pantries, and shelves. It's a symbolic action of clearing out and making room for the new things God is bringing and doing—as well as putting off and away the old.

Celebrating St. Nick's Day

The feast day of St. Nick, one of our most famous saints, falls this week on December 6th. Consider celebrating his day any of the activities listed in our December 6th Devotion!

We think that we shall always see
God's gifts upon our Christmas tree.
You cannot touch them with your hand,
Yet they are there at your command.
There's joy and faith and hope renewed.
There's laughter for a happy mood.
There's gratitude for each new day;
A time to think, a time to pray.
The Christ as come with holy light
to shine and make your pathway bright.
All these are yours if you can see
God's gifts upon your Christmas Tree.
Jim Butcher, 1992

O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree

Traditionally, Christmas trees were set up on Christmas Eve and left up until Epiphany (January 6th): setting up early was considered bad luck! But "fake" trees and changing customs have the Christmas tree appearing in homes any day after Thanksgiving (...or Halloween).

The trees have a lot of symbolism: the lights represent the light of Christ shining in the darkness, the ornaments represent joy (some still wait until the Rose/Joy Sunday to add the ornaments), and the evergreen boughs represent the life and growth found in Christ. A star or angel is often placed on top of the tree in remembrance of the first Christmas.

No matter when you put up your tree, consider gathering around the tree and saying this blessing⁷:

- *May the lights on this tree remind us that Jesus is the Light of the World.*
- *May the (star or angel) on top remind us of the angel's announcement: "A Savior is born! Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace, goodwill toward all people."*
- *May the gifts below remind us of the most precious gift of all: Jesus Christ.*
- **Pray:** *Lord, bless this tree around which we will make many memories this Advent season. Help us to make room in our hearts for your gift to us: Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.*

"Every tree of the field shall
know that I am the Lord"

Ezekiel 17:24

"I am the Light of the World.
Whoever follows me will never walk in
darkness but will have the light of life."

John 8:12

"I bring you good tidings of great joy which
will be to all people. Glory to God in the highest
and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"

from Luke 2:10, 14

"When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.
They saw the child and worshipped him."

from Matthew 2:10-11

⁷ Blessing & Prayer from *Little Way Advent: An Advent Calendar & Guide for Families* by Alyssa French Case

December 6

The Feast of Saint Nicholas⁸
Rev. Magan Stubblefield

Read Matthew 25:31-40

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

Read Matthew 6:2-4

So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

There was once a little boy whose mother and father died when he was only a child. He had great faith and great love for God and he took very seriously Jesus' words to "sell what you own and give the money to the poor." He wanted to give a present to Jesus, so when he was old enough to receive his inheritance, he gave it all to "the least of these" and helped the poor, the sick, and the suffering.

Nicholas became a priest, and eventually a Bishop, in a country we now call Turkey. He did not have an easy life: he was persecuted, exiled, and imprisoned for his faith. When he was released, he went to the Council of Nicea in 325 AD and was among the orthodox bishops who defended the divinity of Jesus against the Arian heresy. Stories say that Nicholas, unable to bear the blasphemy of those who spoke against Jesus' divinity, walked up the leader of the heretics and punched him in the nose (a fun story to think of every time you recite the Nicene Creed, which was the result of the council).

Of all the stories of Nicholas, became most known for his generosity and love for the helpless. He loved to bless other people, but he was shy. He would try to work in secret so that no one would know. One story tells of St. Nicholas helping a family by tossing gold coins in through an open window. Another tells of him saving innocent soldiers from execution. Still another story tells of him saving children from a murderer (...who liked to murder by pickling).

⁸ December 6 marks the church holiday of the Feast of Saint Nicholas (270-345 AD).

The stories that we might know best about Nicholas are the stories of how he gave gifts to the needy on Christmas Eve to celebrate the birthday of Jesus. He did this in secret too. Sometimes the gifts were dropped in through an open window. Sometimes they were left by the door. Sometimes they came down the chimney. Nicholas would tiptoe away in the night, leaving the delight of the gift to be enjoyed in the morning. Of course, eventually, word got out and St. Nicholas became known as a gift-giver.

When Nicholas died, something amazing happened. The gifts that people had found in their homes on Christmas Day continued to appear. His generosity had inspired others to be generous too.

One day the Emperor of Russia heard the story of St. Nicholas. He decided to make Nicholas the patron saint of Russia. Far in the north of Russia, where there was nothing but snow, gifts continued to appear. The story traveled west to Finland, and Sweden, and Norway, and Holland. When Dutch people came to this country, they brought the story with them. Presents began to appear in celebration of Jesus' birth here too, and they still do to this day.

This all began with the gifts of Bishop Nicholas for the children of his town, given because he loved Jesus so much. We remember Nicholas because he gave gifts for God.

*Pray: God of joy and cheer, we thank you for your servant, St. Nick. May we, like him, defend the faith and bless the needy. Make us thoughtful without need of reward so that we, too, may be good followers of Jesus. Amen.*⁹

Feasting & Festivities in honor of Jolly Old St. Nick

There are celebration traditions for St. Nick's Day all over the world!

On the night of December 5, children set stockings and shoes by the fire place for St. Nicholas to fill with treats like a bag of gold chocolate coins (like the gold he tossed through the window), a candy cane (which are associated with his Bishop's staff), and money for the kids to give away to someone in need just like St. Nicholas did with his inheritance. If you're looking for something more simple, consider celebrating the day by reciting the Nicene Creed, giving secret gifts/blessings to others, and eating or decorating with candy canes (which are associated with St. Nick's Bishop staff).

⁹ From *All Through the Day, All Through the Year: Family Prayers and Celebrations*, by David B. Batchelder, 2000.

Read Matthew 22:36-40

Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like, unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

I love the term **Pay it Forward**. Christmas is a good time to learn the meaning of **Pay it Forward**. I heard the story recently of a man on the way to a big family Thanksgiving meal who took his family to Waffle House. He parked in front of the window so his children could see the counter. He told everyone to stay in the car. He walked in and sat at the counter. He ordered a cup of coffee. When the bill came it paid for his coffee and underneath the money, he put five \$100 bills. He left and sat in the car with his family. He told his children to watch the waitress. He said anyone working on Thanksgiving at the Waffle House needed a blessing. They watched as she picked up the money. She quickly looked around to see who left it and maybe it was a mistake. When she decided it wasn't a mistake she bowed as if to say a prayer and then she turned her eyes up to say thank you. No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted.

My **Pay it Forward** story happened on two visits to Chick-fil-A. I was in the line, and I felt that nudge from God that I needed to **Pay it Forward**. So, I ask the employee at the window "How much is the person's bill behind me." She told me and I thought to myself that is a little too much, so I didn't **Pay it Forward**. Immediately, I felt guilty and promised the Lord that the next time I went to Chick-fil-A I would pay it forward. Around a week later, I was headed to Chick-fil-A and about a mile out I knew that I would **Pay it Forward** no matter what it cost. The driver of the car behind me had honked the horn at me because he thought I wasn't speeding up enough at the stop sign. He passed me and if looks could kill, I would be dead. So, I am on my way to Chick-fil-A and he is in front of me all the way. I am thinking I hope he is not going to Chick-fil-A. Sure enough; we were in line, he wound up behind me and yes, I did pay his bill. I received a blessing (even though it hurt a little Ha!). I hope maybe it caused him to slow down and appreciate the kindness paid to him.

Another time, I had a person pay for my bill. The lady at the window said the person in front of you paid your bill. I can see the person in front of me and it is my daughter. I thought that was nice, and then I found out she used my debit card to pay. (Her sense of humor is just like her dad's.)

Showing kindness is an act of Christian love. Jesus commands that we are to love God first, and then love everybody else as much as we love ourselves. So, look for those ways to pay it forward, any type of kindness. You never know how one simple act of kindness can impact someone's life. Reaching out to show kindness can offer someone hope when they're struggling.

Some examples of **Pay it Forward** Kindness ideas:

- Buy the person's coffee behind you in line
- Let someone go in front of you in line who only has a few items

- Leave unused coupons next to corresponding products in the grocery store
- Return shopping carts for people at the grocery store.
- Email or write to a former teacher who made a difference in your life.
- Leave a box of goodies in your mailbox for your mail carrier
- Buy Christmas for a child on the Angel tree list
- And oh yes leave as a tip 5 \$100 bills at the Waffle house.

Pray: Dear God, thank you for everything we have. Help me to love you and others with all of my heart, soul, and mind. Show me ways I can imitate your kindness in my interactions with others.
Amen.

December 8

Rev. Jason Gattis, Smoky Mountain District Superintendent

Read Luke 2:11-14

The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger.” Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying, “Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.”

Every year we gather at this time to prepare for the celebration of Christmas day. In doing so we prepare to celebrate an event that took place 2,000 years ago while also looking forward to a future hope that is eternal. As you pray, read, study, and reflect on the significance of this season, I wanted to share with you a portion of an article I recently read that speaks on this wonderful mystery.

“The Advent season plays with our notion of time. The church gathers in the present to ponder the past for a future hope. A Christmas Carol is a beautiful story for the Advent season because it is a tale in which the past, present and future all come together in one transformative night. Certainly this story is about Scrooge’s love of money and his altruistic failures, but it is also a story about how Scrooge cannot let go of his past. Early in the story, after establishing that Marley had been dead for some time, Dickens writes, “Scrooge never painted out Old Marley’s name. There it stood, years afterwards, above the warehouse door: Scrooge and Marley” (Stave One). Scrooge seems to cling to the past because his (only?) friend Marley represented the only things in which Scrooge trusts: hard work, frugality, unwavering discipline and action that can be weighed, measured and counted.

Jesus came to save us from counting our past as our only reality. It’s like when Moses led God’s people out of Egyptian slavery into the wilderness. Before they reached the Promised Land, the Book of Exodus says, “The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, ‘If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt ... for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger’” (Exodus 16:2-3). Because living in the wilderness was difficult and they were caught wandering between where they were and where they were heading, the people complained and wished they had died as slaves. The people became stubborn and bitter (see Exodus 32:9), almost “Scroogelike” in their relationship with God and one another. Instead of moving forward in faith, trusting that God was with them, the people kept looking over their shoulders, hopelessly lamenting over the way things were.

Advent is like living in the wilderness between what was and what will be. Living into this tension, remembering God’s promises, and depending on faith become spiritual disciplines that keep us from becoming Scrooges ourselves. Even though the Promised Land may seem far off, we hold tightly to the promises of our God, for “he who promised is faithful” (Hebrews 10:23).”

—An excerpt from *The Redemption of Scrooge* by Matt Rawle

Pray: Lord, as we prepare to receive Christ into the world, help us to remember the bright future we have through you, no matter what is in our past.

December 9

from MUMC's 1990 Advent Devotional
Nancy Brown (1939 - 2020)

Read Psalm 27

The LORD is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?

When the wicked advance against me to devour me, it is my enemies and my foes who will stumble and fall. Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then I will be confident. One thing I ask from the LORD, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple. For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent and set me high upon a rock. Then my head will be exalted above the enemies who surround me; at his sacred tent I will sacrifice with shouts of joy; I will sing and make music to the LORD.

Hear my voice when I call, LORD; be merciful to me and answer me. My heart says of you, "Seek his face!" Your face, LORD, I will seek. Do not hide your face from me, do not turn your servant away in anger; you have been my helper. Do not reject me or forsake me, God my Savior. Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me. Teach me your way, LORD; lead me in a straight path because of my oppressors. Do not turn me over to the desire of my foes, for false witnesses rise up against me, spouting malicious accusations.

*I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.
Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage;
Wait for the LORD.*

I am a member of the "sandwich" generation. I have adult children and an aging parent to take my time and attention. Sometimes I treat myself badly by driving myself into a state of exhaustion, straining and pushing and tugging under life's heavy weight and responsibilities. I live as though there was no flow of power available to me. It is easy to forget how to rest and renew energy. Simple become aware of God's presence, realizing that He will help us.

Today, my hope is that my Christian witness will not suffer because of life's responsibilities that through God I will be able to deal with all events of life with courage.

Pray: Dear God, please strengthen and give us courage each day. Help us to remember that as Christians we are never alone. Amen.

Where's Waldo?

Read 2 Peter 3:8-15

But do not forget this one thing, dear friends; With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise, we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells. So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him. Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him.

Do you remember the *Where's Waldo* books? First released in the 80s, the large illustrations are packed with detailed, chaotic scenes that ask for readers to find one red-and-white striped man named Waldo on each page. We have several at our house leftover from when our own kids were young and now when our grandchildren spend the night, these are often requested at bedtime. Sometimes can't find Waldo and give up and go on to the next page. Other times we spend a lot of time looking at everything on the page, and almost forget to look for Waldo. Then there are the times Waldo almost jumps off the page because he is so easy to find.

As we read *Where's Waldo?* this weekend (for the hundredth time), an idea came to me for the advent devotional. It was "Where's Jesus" - instead of looking for Waldo let's look for Jesus! I asked Magan for a list of Advent Scriptures and started reading hoping to find the one to go with my theme. After reading nine Scriptures I didn't find my focus for that idea. No, instead there were lots of words about obedience, patience, suffering, strengthening, blameless, holy, godly lives, night and day praying, standing firm, servant, and endurance.

Whew! That is a lot harder than I had in mind. These passages called for my active participation in spiritual growth. I am called to work and focus on being "found spotless, blameless and at peace with Him" (2 Peter 3:14). This is work, but thanks be to God that "He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:8).

Pray: Dear Lord Jesus, may I make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with You. Amen.

Read Philippians 4:5b-7

The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Having gone to church all my life, I thought I had heard and sung all the great Christmas carols. It came as a surprise to me when, in a new church, I heard the song “In the Bleak Midwinter” for the first time. The words and music were not only beautiful, but had a powerful message for me, and still do now.

*In the bleak midwinter
Frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron
Water like a stone
Snow had fallen, snow on snow
Snow on snow.
In the bleak midwinter
Long, long ago.*

*In the bleak midwinter,
A stable-lace sufficed
The Lord God Almighty,
Jesus Christ.*

*What can I give Him
Poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd
I would give a lamb;
If I were a Wise Man,
I would do my part;
But what can I give Him?
Give Him my heart.¹⁰*

I found out later that this was an English carol, first set to music in 1906. To me, the words are especially meaningful to us today. The pandemic has been a kind of “bleak midwinter” to us for almost two years. During this time, the world has not only been plagued by a dreadful disease, but we have been in a “winter” of severe political divisions. At times, it has seemed as if our world and our hearts have been “hard as iron” or “water like a stone.”

But Advent is a season where our hearts can draw away from the “frosty wind” and seek anew the warmth and peace brought to us by that baby long ago. I love the trappings that come with the Christmas season: the decorating, preparing presents, and even the cooking. But none of these things will lead us out of the darkness and fear around us. The only way is found in the last line of that old carol, “Give God our heart.”

Pray: Dear Heavenly Father, during this Advent season, help us to seek you during this difficult “winter season” and show us how to trust that you will lead us to the Holy Light. Amen.

¹⁰ Words by Christina Rossetti; Music by Gustav Holst (United Methodist Hymnal)

"Be strong, do not fear; your God will come"

from Isaiah 35:4

Prayer for Illumination: God of love and power, you are revealed to us in your Word, in accounts of prophecy and fulfillment that direct our attention to Jesus Christ. Illumine us now as we hear your Word, that we may open our hearts to him, yearn for his coming in glory, and serve him with joy. Amen.

Read Isaiah 35:1-10

The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the LORD, the splendor of our God. Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you." Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow. And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness; it will be for those who walk on that Way. The unclean will not journey on it; wicked fools will not go about on it. No lion will be there, nor any ravenous beast; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there, and those the LORD has rescued will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

Read James 5:7-10

Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door! Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

Read Matthew 11:2-11

When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me." As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: "'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Closing Prayer: Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. *Amen.*¹¹

¹¹ Collect for the Third Sunday in Advent, Book of Common Prayer (1979)

Living Liturgically

the third week of Advent

Thinking About Christmas

Mary Blanche Brown, from MUMC's 1990 Devotional

What does Christmas mean to you? Stores and street decorations. Christmas parades. Giving and receiving gifts. Preparing a bountiful meal. Christmas trees with all the trimmings. Yes, these are a part of Christmas, but if these things are all it means to us, we have missed the real meaning.

Almost two thousand years ago a baby was born in Bethlehem whose birth we celebrate at Christmas. He was the Son of God – God loved us so much he gave his only Son who willingly went to Calvary and died for our sins that we might become a child of His.

My prayer is that we might truly know the meaning of Christmas. God gave the world the Greatest Gift ever given – His Son to be the Savior of all men. Amen.

Preparing for the Big Day

Whatever else your holiday schedule may have you bustling, December 25th is of course, actually a birthday celebration. Start planning the birthday now: gifts, card, birthday cake and candles, etc. What gift will you give Jesus this year? Are you a birthday cake, cupcake, or pie family? One fun and thoughtful tradition has families make/write a birthday card for Jesus and place it under the tree. If your lighting your Advent wreath each night, it's perfect to do while the candles are still lit. On the card, write about how you've seen Jesus at work this year, how you've felt his presence, or through whom you've felt his care. Thank him for coming among us. For kiddos, or for those needing more direct prompts, here are some ideas:

- 1) Happy birthday, Jesus!
- 2) Thank you for...
- 3) I'm glad you were born because...
- 4) This year, I want to serve you by...

A Christmas Memory

Lynn Love, from MUMC's 1991 Advent Devotional

I can remember so well the first Christmas after we had gotten electricity in our community. It must have been in the mid-1930's and we three children did our homework at what we called our "library table," by the light of our Aladdin lamp, which was a vast improvement over the regular kerosene lamp. My sister and I relied on our trusty flashlight to go up the stairs to bed each night. At Christmas time that year, when we came down the stairs on Christmas morning, we found that Santa had left us the prettiest little lamp we had ever seen. He had left it burning brightly with a note telling us it was for our bedside table so we could see our way up and down the stairs and wouldn't need our flashlight any longer. Over the years I have often likened the memory of our little lamp to the birth of Jesus on that Christmas long ago when He came to earth to be the light of the world to show all mankind the way to eternal life.



Pecan Pie Filling

Lynn Love, Middlesettlements UIMC's UIMW Cookbook

- 3 eggs, slightly beaten
- 1 cup sugar
- 2/3 cup pecans
- 1/2 cup Karo (blue label)
- 1 tsp vanilla
- 1/8 tsp salt

Mix together all ingredients, adding nuts last. Bake in 9 inch crust at 450° for 10 minutes, then reduce to 350° and bake until silver knife comes out clean.

Pecan Pie and Gifts

Read John 3:16

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.

Every year at Christmas and Thanksgiving I make Pecan Pies. Although I could make them at other times of the year, like at Easter or Fourth of July, it just doesn't seem right. My mother used to make them, but now I do. I use the same recipe she used that comes from the Mertie Russell Circle Cook book that was published when Pastor Lawrence was at Middlesettlements, and I have her copy of the book. The recipe was contributed by Lynn Love.¹²

Lynn Love has been in my life as long as I can remember. She and my mother were friends in high school and played on the same basketball team. We have a picture of them, and if you can get past the weird hair-dos and the very short uniforms, it is a neat picture. My sister Vicki and Judy Love were born in the same year, and as I was ten years old, I can remember them as babies. Lynn was my Sunday school teacher during my high school and college years. If you have ever had to deal with this age, you know how challenging it can be. At that time I had formed my own ideas about many things, but Lynn in a gentle and instructive way kept telling me what the Bible had to say. I know others in the church family helped to lay the foundation for my knowledge of the Bible, but it was through her teaching those Sunday school classes, I began to understand so much about the Bible.

Lynn did other things with us a class, like having us at her house for Christmas parties. There were a few years that Lynn could not attend Church, because her parents needed care. She worked through the week, and stayed with them on the weekends. In later years, I attended several bible studies with Lynn, and we both continued to learn more about the Bible. However, Sunday school is still one of my favorite times of the week. Thanks Lynn for giving me two great gifts, your time and your pecan pie recipe.

Pray: *Dear Great and Merciful God, thank you for the gift of your Son and for the Advent season to celebrate this gift. Bless all who give the gift of their time in your service. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*

¹² You can find a copy of this recipe on the Living Liturgically page attached to our December 12th devotion!

Advent - Is it the Beginning?

Read Micah 5:2

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.

We humans have such a funny way of putting everything in a box. Nicely wrapped up so our minds can grasp it. Without said boundaries we just have no point of reference from which to make sense of it all. Everything must have a beginning. A place or time from which to proceed. So it is with Advent. A point on the calendar each year where we suddenly move into this reflective time of now being reminded to wait once again.

When you read through the book of Micah do not plan on being super encouraged as the prophet shares some pretty tough messages to the unfaithful people. Safe to say the folks from Judah were in trouble with God. In fact it reminds me of the book of Jeremiah and his similar prophetic message to Judah that God was going to deal with them harshly.

But suddenly in chapter 5 there is this little clan Bethlehem of Ephratha who is separated out from all the other clans of Judah because it was so small and insignificant. Thus the tune “O Little Town of Bethlehem”.

Back to the thinking outside the box, consider for a minute the fact that Micah was written somewhere around 700-800 B.C. God is either showing off by making the most improbable come true from this prophecy, or perhaps he somehow already knew. Now how could that be possible that God would already know that Jesus would be born in such a small place? Again, we are so prone to living within the boundaries we are given such as time. So to make sense of this, I choose to believe that God does not have these same boundaries. He can move and be present at all times. Not something I can get my head around but regardless of my limited capacity it doesn't change his majesty.

So here's my take.... God whispers to Micah, “tell them that a ruler will be born in Bethlehem”. It must have seemed to Micah like an A.D.D. moment of distracted thought but God wanted the message included with all the others. Why? Because just like us he knew they would want to validate the Lordship of Christ by perfectly coordinating these unique special messages throughout history and making sure they were recorded.

I just love the fact that I do not know how God pulled all of these things together throughout the course of time to set up the gift of Jesus. It is so awesome to watch it all unfold and this little clue buried in Micah Chapter 5 is just one “small” example.

Pray: *Lord, please help us to stay amazed by your majesty and that the things that bind us in this world do not bind you. Allow us to see with our limited minds how you are weaving our stories with yours. I pray this season you will help us to get outside the box and know we are watching the creator of the universe do his work.*

December 15

Dora Hooks

What must it have been like on that cold night in a dusty, smelly barn? Cattle moving and murmuring. No doctor, no nurses, no one experienced in birthing a baby. Just two. Two people, selected by God himself, to usher in the covenant child; the One who would change heaven and earth in a most unusual way. Even during this child's 33 years on this earth, expectations were so very wrong. He came not as a conquering avenger for his people, Israel. He came like others born in this barn—as a meek, mild being who served, rather than being served, who gave rather than taking. He came as a gift to people, to us (so many, many years in the future).

His was a birth foretold by Prophets and Priests thousands of years before the birth occurred:

Micah (between 700 & 650 BC). *“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”* (Micah 5:2)

Daniel (about 530 BC). *“In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.”* (Daniel 7:13-14)

How fortunate are we that we have the holy written word of God—the Bible. We can look to the very beginnings of this earth, the very beginnings of mankind. We have God's promises, written down that tell us about a loving God, a loving Son, who made us, nurtures us, who gave all—even unto death—so that we, so undeserving, have a gift for the asking, denied to no one--the gift of life lived with the Father and the Son for all eternity. Praise be to God. Amen.

Pray: Holy Father. We are unworthy of the love you have shown. You have showered us with blessing upon blessing throughout our lives. We know we can do nothing to deserve all you have done for us. You wait patiently as a loving Father for us to even acknowledge you exist. Such love! Such desire to have us with you! We owe you each heartbeat, each breath. We are favored to be sons and daughters of yours. Thank you, Holy Father. Thank you. Amen.

December 16

from MUMC's 1990 Advent Devotional

Juanita Brown (1926 - 2021)

Read Ecclesiastes 11:1-6 (NLT & NRSV)

Send out your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will get it back. But divide your investments among many places, for you do not know what risks might lie ahead.

When clouds are heavy, the rains come down. Whether a tree falls north or south, it stays where it falls. Farmers who wait for perfect weather never plant. If they watch every cloud, they never harvest.

Just as you do not know how the breath comes to the bones in the mother's womb, so you do not know the work of God, who makes everything. In the morning sow your seed, and at evening do not let your hands be idle; for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good.

What does the coming of the new year hold?

The responses to that question are as varied as the people who respond. The optimist speaks in glowing terms of potentialities and hopes fulfilled. The pessimist talks of gloom and foreboding. The realist is bogged down in hard facts. The response of religious people covers the whole wide spectrum – from hope for the world to a vision of the world's destruction and deliverance from it.

The truth of 2021¹³, no one knows. Both individually and personally – as well as collectively – we walk into a year where there is no certainty. We do not know if personal or national tragedy awaits. We do not know what gracious surprises might be upon us. Things we plan for, fail to materialize. Unsought gifts rain upon us. We don't know what effort will be blessed. We don't know what seed will grow, if any.

The writer of Ecclesiastes tells us: just keep sowing...day and night...regardless.

I heard a beautiful children's musical and the theme was, "Climbing a Mountain as Difficulties Arise." A person climbs a mountain "One Step at a Time." It's the same with life working and trusting in God to take one step at a time to get into the "Footprints of God."

GOD LOVES YOU...ALWAYS

Pray: *Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask thee to stay close by me forever, and love me, I pray; bless all the dear children in thy tender care, and fit us for heaven to live with thee there.*¹⁴

¹³ Originally "1991":)

¹⁴ Prayer taken from "Away in a Manger"

A Thrill of Hope

Read Romans 15:4

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.

Read Jeremiah 14:22

Do any of the worthless idols of the nations bring rain? Do the skies themselves send down showers? No, it is you, LORD our God. Therefore our hope is in you, for you are the one who does all this.

Read Hebrews 6:18-19

So God has given both his promise and his oath. These two things are unchangeable because it is impossible for God to lie. Therefore, we who have fled to him for refuge can have great confidence as we hold to the hope that lies before us. This hope is a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls. It leads us through the curtain into God's inner sanctuary.

It's hard to overstate how important hope is in our lives. When things are going bad, there is hope that it will get better, and that gets us through. Even when life is good, there is the hope that it will stay that way. The true stories that captivate us so completely almost always have the dark place. The situation where the characters are desperate, the odds are against them and the world is falling down around them, but there is that small glimmer of hope. They latch on to that hope, and it all works out.

My favorite Christmas carol is "O Holy Night". The music and lyrics come together in a way that causes me to worship right then, right there. It's a beautiful retelling of the gospel. The world is in a dark place of sin, slavery and oppression, but then: "a thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices."

The words were originally a poem written in 1843.¹⁵ Webster's 1828 Dictionary defines thrill as "to pierce or penetrate" and hope as "a desire of some good, accompanied with at least a slight expectation of obtaining it, or belief that it is obtainable." In 19th century language, "a thrill of hope" is a piercing, penetrating desire and expectation of an obtainable good.

The way the bible uses the word "hope" is quite different than the way we would think of it today. Where we would hope for a good outcome, there is a chance that it won't happen. In the Old Testament "hope" is interchanged with "trust". When Jeremiah addresses God, "Our hope is in You." In a passage about the confidence we have in God's promises,

¹⁵ Fun fact: On Christmas Eve, 1906, the very first AM radio program was broadcast. The program included "O Holy Night" and a reading from Luke 2. The main audience was an unknown number of shipboard radio operators along the Atlantic Coast.

Hebrews mentions taking refuge by seizing the sure anchor of hope that is set before us. Hope is the proper response to the promises of God.

In other words, “the thrill of hope” is a piercing penetrating desire and sure expectation for God’s promise of Christ to appear.

That’s why the weary world rejoices. That’s why we rejoice as we experience the thrill of hope this Advent season.

***Pray:** Father, as we enter this season of Advent, let us be filled with wonder and rejoice with joy at the gift of hope that is in the coming of Jesus.*

God—the best “Gift Giver”

Read Matthew 2:7-11

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.” After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Read Matthew 7:11

If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!

In December 2017, we volunteered to deliver bread and jam to our church's shut-ins and met in the Sunday School building for our assigned group. Dora Hooks and I paired up, grabbed our six decorated bags of homemade goodies along with a Christmas card from the church family and headed out. We both were filled with the Christmas Spirit of giving and by the end of our delivery journey, we were also filled with the Holy Spirit of receiving.

Starting out with smiles on our faces, mine turned to giggling and laughter as I observed Dora talking to her car GPS: "Mary-ville...MA-ree-ville...MA-REE-ville!" We finally had everything in order and ready to "spread" our bread and jam and love to those missing our church family. Our first stop was Joyce Mays and she was feeling a little under the weather, so we blew her kisses, wished her well, handed her the goodies and proceeded to our next stop. We got a "two-fer" next as we went to see my mom, Mable Love-Brown, and Betty Cox, who were next-door neighbors. Momma was so happy to see Dora and, as we all know, enjoyed talking and visiting, if only for a short time. I watched her eyes light up as did Betty's when we came in and up the stairs to her living room..."Well, June, I never woulda thought of seeing you today!" Next we went to see Jean Turner in the nursing home. She was surprised and wanted to talk all things family and constantly apologized for "how bad I look" which was totally untrue as anyone who knows her can attest. We stopped to see Callie Brown and got a tour of her lovely cottage-style home and a big smile and hugs all around. Our final visit was with Juanita Brown who immediately wanted to share our gifts for her with us at her kitchen table.

I wanted to share these particular memories because as I write today, five of these six church family members have gone on to be with God's family in heaven. It took so little of our time to give to all these women, whether goodies, a face-to-face, laughter, or just to let them know they are not forgotten by those who care and love them. Gifts are a powerful thing in someone's life, so don't overlook or minimize how special any of your efforts or expressions of your love can be.

That is what God gave to us--His one and only Son who came to live and die for our sins. As happy as we were to give and share with these shut-ins, I can only imagine the smile on God's face as He planned the coming of Jesus as a baby boy to give to us. A surprise gift! Although, in truth, it was foretold many years before. Just as the Wise Men brought gifts, God gave us a gift, and we can give what we have to honor Him. In this Advent season, even though it appears Thanksgiving has disappeared, let's remember to GIVE thanks.

For our prayer, let's use this song that my family would sing at our supper table:

*"Into my heart, into my heart,
Come into my heart, Lord Jesus,
Come in today, come in to stay,
Come into my heart, Lord Jesus."*

Amen.

December 19

4th Sunday in Advent

"You are among those who are loved by God, belong to Jesus, and are called to be his holy people"

from Romans 1:6-7

Prayer for Illumination: Immanuel, as we wait for your return, help us to see your glory and love through the reading of your Word. Amen.

Read Isaiah 7:10-16

Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, "Ask the LORD your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights." But Ahaz said, "I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test." Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. He will be eating curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, for before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste.

Read Romans 1:1-7

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name's sake. And you also are among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

Read Matthew 1:18-25

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Closing Prayer: Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*¹⁶

¹⁶ Collect for the Fourth Sunday in Advent, *Book of Common Prayer* (1979)

Living Liturgically

✿ the fourth week of Advent ✿

A Prayer for Christmas Eve

O God, you have caused this holy night to shine with the brightness of the true Light: Grant that we, who have known the mystery of that Light on earth, may also enjoy him perfectly in heaven; where with you and the Holy Spirit he lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.

Blue Christmas: The Longest Night

December 21st marks the longest night of 2021, which serves as a reminder in the Church that Jesus, the Light of the World comes to us in our darkest spaces. Dealing with the death of a loved one, coping with personal loss, living with disease or pain, struggling with depression—the holidays can be difficult. In the Church, December 21st is also called “Blue Christmas” or “The Longest Night” and is a time to specifically remember and pray about the grief and pain of ourselves and others, as well as to focus on the hope we have in Jesus.

Christmas Card Prayers¹⁷

Around the dinner table this week (or at bedtime), gather all the Christmas cards your family has received this Advent season and place them in a pile. Read letters aloud, share special memories you have of that person, but most importantly, pray for them. If you'd like to pray for each family individually, split the cards up, and each person in your family can take a turn praying something like this: *“Dear God, we give you thanks for the friends and family represented by these cards. Bless each one of them this Advent season and in the coming year. May they know the love and joy that comes through your Son, our Savior, this Christmas season. Amen.”*

Feasting & Festivities

December 21st was the traditional feast day for St. Thomas, before it was moved to July in 1969. On December 21st, the poor would go “gooding” door to door. Gooding is a little like trick-or-treating, in which homes were presented with the chance to do “good” to those who knocked. Gooding on St. Thomas day was called “Thomassing” and it usually involved singing. Or you could wait until New Years and go from house to house singing, offering God’s blessing on the occupants for the forthcoming year, and being treated to bowls of spiced cider. Wassail (from “Waes Hael!”) means “Good health!” and is probably still a good thing to shout to someone. If you don’t physically go a-Wassailing this New Year, consider praying for good health upon all to whom you’d care to carol.

A-Thomassing, a-wassailing, and a-caroling aren’t exactly the same, but since all three involve singing door to door near Christmas, we’ll call it “close enough.” In the spirit of St. Thomas’ day this week, find the chance to give to the poor, sing someone some carols, pray good health for others, and enjoy a cup of Wassail!

Wassail

Joyce Overton, Middlesettlements UMC's UMW Cookbook

- 2 quarts apple cider
- 1 tsp allspice berries
- 2-3 sticks cinnamon
- 12 whole cloves
- 2/3 cup brown sugar
- Ground nutmeg to taste

Tie allspice, cinnamon, and cloves in a bag. Combine cider and brown sugar; heat, stirring until sugar dissolves. Add spice bag; simmer 15-20 minutes. Remove bag. Serve piping hot. Sprinkle with nutmeg.

Love and joy come to you,
And to you your wassail too;
And God bless you
and send you
a Happy New Year.
And God send you
a Happy New Year!

¹⁷ from *Little Way Advent: An Advent Calendar & Guide for Families* by Alyssa French Case

December 20

Kathy Puckett

Read *(from the cantata The King of Love)*

Mary was the first to hear it,
Name that came from heaven above.
Name that raises souls from darkness,
This the only name worth singing of.
Wonderful name.....**Jesus!**
Wonderful name.....**Jesus!**
Name angels sang, the night all heaven rang.
Wonderful name.....**Jesus**

I woke up in the middle of the night several nights ago with this song running through my mind. I had not thought about this song in at least a year or more. This is one of my favorite songs from the Christmas cantatas that the choir has done over the years. And it has stayed with me since that night and has me thinking about that wonderful name Jesus.

Names are important. Expectant mothers spend a lot of time choosing the best and perfect name for their babies. Maybe they want to carry on a family name or maybe they want their child to have a unique name or popular name. For Mary it was different.

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you. Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.'" (Luke 1:26-33)

After finding out that she was to carry God's son, Mary was faithful to God and did everything asked of her. And so, her little son was named Jesus. At the time she learned she was to have an incredibly special child, the baby's name was surely the least of her concerns. But, I wonder, as she carried her child if she wished she could have picked out his name.

If Mary could have known then how precious the name of Jesus would be to so many people, she would have been amazed. If Mary could have known then how many people have sung and will continue to sing about the name of Jesus, her heart would have been overflowing.

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. (Phil 2:9-11)

Wonderful name.....**JESUS!**

Pray: Dear Jesus, We praise your wonderful name over and over. It never grows old.
Thank you for coming to earth as a sweet baby bringing salvation for all people. Amen.

Grieving with Hope

Read Romans 8:18-25

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance.

Read Psalm 116

*I love the LORD, for he heard my voice;
he heard my cry for mercy.
Because he turned his ear to me,
I will call on him as long as I live.
The cords of death entangled me,
the anguish of the grave came over me;
I was overcome by distress and sorrow.
Then I called on the name of the LORD:
"LORD, save me!"
The LORD is gracious and righteous;
our God is full of compassion.
The LORD protects the unwary;
when I was brought low, he saved me.
Return to your rest, my soul,
for the LORD has been good to you.
For you, LORD, have delivered me from death,
my eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling,
that I may walk before the LORD
in the land of the living.
I trusted in the LORD when I said,
"I am greatly afflicted";
in my alarm I said,
"Everyone is a liar."
What shall I return to the LORD
for all his goodness to me?*

¹⁸ December 21st marks the longest night of 2021, which serves as a reminder in the Church that Jesus, the Light of the World comes to us in our darkest spaces. For more about this day, check out the Living Liturgically page attached to our December 19th devotion.

*I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the LORD.
I will fulfill my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all his people.
Precious in the sight of the LORD
is the death of his faithful servants.
Truly I am your servant, LORD;
I serve you just as my mother did;
you have freed me from my chains.
I will sacrifice a thank offering to you
and call on the name of the LORD.
I will fulfill my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all his people,
in the courts of the house of the LORD—
in your midst, Jerusalem.
Praise the LORD.*

For many, the holidays are a time of sorrow and longing for loved ones who have passed away, or even for those who cannot join in the celebration for a wide variety of reasons. As special family recipes are made, there will be thoughts, if not comments, about how it's "just not the same as ___" would have done it. The ache of missing a loved one can at times seem to overshadow the joy of the holy-days, as if we cannot seem to push through the foggy shadows to prepare ourselves for God to reveal Himself yet again.

In our grieving, our hearts are connecting with all of creation yearning for God's full redemption. We think of Anna and Simon, both of whom waited their entire lives for a glimpse of the Savior. We are called to wait with hope and perseverance, even as the darkness threatens to close in around us. Our perspective as Christians is fundamentally different. We know that as our hearts, and sometimes our eyes too, cry for comfort we have the presence of God with us already but that He will still reveal more to us - He will continue to heal us in our grief.

Perhaps during the seasons when the shadows seem the deepest, we are called to prepare our hearts the most. Candles that are burning brightly and steadily are not the ones that need the wicks trimmed and the excess wax poured off. If we are sputtering & flickering, we can ask God to renew His Light within us, no matter how dark it grows around us. If joy feels out of reach this Advent season, then prepare yourself for the perseverance needed to hope for what is yet unseen, to open to the comfort of the Holy One who is coming, and to faithfully cling to the victory that we know God has already achieved. Grief is heavy and hard and relentless, but God is so much more, and we can praise Him through a difficult Advent to prepare our hearts for whatever He wishes to show us now.

Pray: Heavenly Father, Prince of Peace, Holy Comforter - we come before you now with grief that drags us down. Lift up our heads to see You. Hold these wounded hearts gently as You tend and nurture us through this pain. We know you have the victory but as we are still in this broken world, the ache & longing for redemption feels overpowering. We choose once again to trust in Your perfect timing, even when we don't understand. Please guide us as we seek to prepare for You in the midst of all this. Amen

December 22

Linda Hearon

Prince of Peace

Read Isaiah 9:6

*For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor,
Mighty God,
Everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace.*

Our Savior has been given many names, but Prince of Peace is the one most dear to me. Our lives have been so uncertain since COVID-19 has been in our midst. The Prince of Peace has been ever-present through this time. We all have trials and troubles every day, but when the Prince of Peace is walking with me, I feel secure and at peace. When we focus on Him, we will feel His presence and His Peace. A most wonderful gift!

Pray: Thank you Jesus, my Prince of Peace. Amen.

December 23

from MUMC's 1993 Advent Devotional
Mable Love Brown (1936 - 2018)

What Do You Think of Jesus?

Read Matthew 16:13-19

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

I stood in "The Aussie Shop" in Geraldton, West Australia facing the shop owner, a curly-haired, graying middle-aged man with penetrating blue eyes. He watched, with a friendly smile, as I piled the counter high with souvenirs for my friends and family back home...and asked the usual questions, once he heard me speak.

"Where's your home? How did you happen to come to West Australia? Where are you staying? How did you happen to know these people?" In between his questions I explained that my home is in Tennessee...that our church held a "New World Mission" in March of 1988...that the Rev. Mike Fawcett of the Uniting Church in Geraldton was our Missioner...he stayed in my home during the time he was here...and kept his promise to return and bring his wife and children to visit me again in 1990. They invited me to come to Australia...and visit with them..."so, here I am!"

Evidently my reference to the Church inspired his next question: "tell me...what do you think of Jesus?"

I was somewhat taken aback by the question and answered, "no one has ever asked me that question before..." My mind quickly formulated a prayer ("Dear Lord, this is YOUR opportunity. Please tell me what to say: I want MY answer to be YOUR answer!") and the words began to come...with ease and confidence...

"Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the ONLY Son of God, born of the Virgin Mary...He came from Heaven to show us in Human Form the LOVE of GOD for ALL people...was crucified as the one complete, perfect sacrifice for the sins of ALL mankind; was buried...and was resurrected and ascended back into Heaven. By believing this in faith and obedience I am saved from my sins and promised Eternal Life with Him and with all those that believe and trust and obey His commandments."

He watched my face as I spoke and his expression softened as my "Affirmation of Faith" poured forth...I felt radiant at that moment...and a Heavenly peace settled over me as I said a silent Amen and prayer of thanksgiving. I've often wondered what impact my testimony

had on him...the only thing I would have added would have been...“the real question is NOT ‘what do I think of Jesus?’ but rather, ‘What does Jesus think of me?’”

Pray: O God, you make us glad by the yearly festival of the birth of your only Son Jesus Christ: Grant that we may joyfully receive him as our Redeemer, and with sure confidence behold him when he comes to be our Judge; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. *Amen.*¹⁹

¹⁹ from the Collect for Christmas, *Book of Common Prayer* (1979)

The Christmas Truce of 1914²⁰

Read Luke 2:13-14

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

Read 2 Corinthians 13:11

Finally, brethren, farewell. Be perfect, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you.

Beginning on Christmas Eve, 1914, many British and German soldiers fighting in World War I sang Christmas carols to each other across the lines and later Allied troops even heard brass bands joining the Germans in their joyous singing. At dawn on Christmas Day, a number of German soldiers emerged from their trenches calling out “Merry Christmas” in their enemies’ native languages. After seeing that the German soldiers were unarmed, the Allied soldiers likewise emerged from their trenches and shook hands with their enemies. They exchanged presents of cigarettes and plum puddings and sang carols and songs. This happened at a number of locations in Europe. Imagine that! During a bloody world war, peace became contagious for a brief period of time.

We often talk about the “Peace of Christmas”. I know over the years I can recall talking with believers and non-believers alike about how there is a feeling of peace in the days around Christmas. Unfortunately, even on one of the holiest of the holy days in our liturgical calendar, that peace is often shattered. We remember all too well when a suicide bomber struck Nashville on Christmas Day, 2020. Yet, even with horrible events like this one, we know by faith we have the peace of Christ (Ephesians 2:14).

Would that we could extend the peace of Christmas to all warring countries, to all Christians and members of other faiths around the world who are suffering religious persecution, and here in our country where we are experiencing political divisiveness that we have not seen in our lifetimes. It can happen through, love, faith, and prayer.

Pray: Almighty Father, we praise You and thank You for sending Your Son to us to save us from our sins by His death on the cross. We praise You and thank You for the resurrection 3 days later, and that we know by faith He will return in glory one day. Help us as Christians to spread the peace of Christmas to a needy world all year long. Amen.

²⁰ For more information on The Christmas Truce of 1914, please go to www.history.com/topics/world-war-i/christmas-truce-of-1914

December 25

Magan Stubblefield

Merry Christmas!

Read John 1:1-14

In the beginning was Jesus, and Jesus was with God, and Jesus was God. Through him all things were made and *in* him was life—and that life was the light of all mankind. Jesus is God from the beginning, reigning with the Father and the Spirit.

Jesus wasn't created when he was in Mary's womb—Jesus was in the beginning with the Father and the Spirit. To make sure we get this, John even uses the same words to tell Jesus' story as Genesis uses to talk about creation: "in the beginning." In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth...in the beginning was the Word, Jesus, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. "All things came into being through him and without him not one thing came into being"—the whole world came into being through him. And he is the world's light and life, the light and life of all people.

From the very beginning, before God laid down the earth's foundations, he had us in mind—he had settled on us as the focus of his love, he had decided to adopt us as his children and for us to be whole and holy. And from the beginning, even before sin came into the world, this joy and love and holiness God chose to off us was going to be through Jesus. Jesus was in the beginning, before the heavens and the earth, and from the beginning it was in him that God would make us his children.

John wants us to know why Jesus came. His gospel doesn't tell the stories of the baby Jesus, or even the child Jesus. It tells the story of Jesus, who John calls the Word, who was present at creation, present from the very beginning—became flesh and dwelt among us. It had taken centuries for God's people to be ready, but at Christmas, the time had come for the best part of God's plan. God himself was going to come—not to punish his people, but to rescue them. God was coming to save his people, and draw them back to himself, just as he had promised in the beginning.

John tells us why Jesus came—why Christmas happened: "to all who received Jesus, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God." Jesus' birth begins the journey to the cross and resurrection. But Jesus' birth also tells us about our God. Our God loves us. He loves us enough to humble himself, loves us enough to dwell among us—which doesn't just mean hanging out with us, but to live in the midst of our sin and our ignorance and our selfishness. He loves us enough to come to us in order to draw us back into relationship with him—and the cost isn't just the cross, but coming into our darkness and hopelessness and selfishness and death in order to show us his Light.

Darkness in scripture isn't stars and moon and nighttime...darkness in scripture is a plague, a realm of evil, a kingdom ruled over by Satan. Its separation from God and goodness and joy and life. It's a place where death and sickness win, a place where the future holds no hope, a place where nothing but grief and futility wait. And it is into *this* that Jesus steps. It's into this, the mess that came from abandoning him in the beginning, that he willingly enters...and defeats.

Christmas is the rescue story that had been planned and promised ever since the Garden of Eden—a rescue that unfolds as Jesus, light of the world that was made through him, stepped down into the darkness that sin had made. Jesus enters as a little baby and the darkness can't overcome him, even though it tries through Herod and religious hypocrites and Roman rulers and even death on a cross. But darkness doesn't win. Darkness *can't* win. The powers of this world are proved powerless and the story of Jesus coming as a baby is the story of triumph over the power of evil and loneliness and death. It's a story of conquest, of victory over grief and sin and hopelessness. The sweet little Jesus boy is a conquering King, whose very presence makes salvation and peace and purpose and peace possible, even as he lays asleep in the hay.

This King, this baby, this Light and Life of the World—Jesus—it's He who steps down from the realm of joy and enters our darkness to save us. For anyone who says "yes" to him, for anyone who will just reach out and accept his gift, Jesus offers a rescue from darkness. Jesus offers *salvation*, the gift of becoming a child of God, reborn and remade and recreated, freed *from* the darkness of this world and freed *for* the light of the kingdom of God. Thanks be to God.

Prayer: All glory to you, great God, for the gift of your Son, light in darkness and hope of the world, whom you sent to save us. With singing angels, let us praise your name and tell the earth his story, that all may believe, rejoice, and bow down, acknowledging your love through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.²¹

Feasting & Festivities for Jesus' Birthday

The Twelve Days of Christmas – today is just Day One!

Christmas Day begins the 12 Days of Christmas and is followed by 11 more days of rejoicing. If you've been rushed and harried this Advent preparing for Christmas, give yourself a breather. You've been doing exactly what Advent is about ("getting ready") and now it's time to rest and rejoice. If Christmas Day isn't perfect (schedules, in-laws, exhaustion, family can't make it in until later, presents seem to win over a focus on Jesus, etc.), remember there are 11 more days to do what helps you rejoice in the coming of Jesus. Plan for ways to rest, rejoice, and make merry for the next 12 Days!. After all, we're celebrating that, "for us and our salvation," God would come down from heaven & become incarnate.

To help with that, this year MUMC is including the *Twelve Days of Christmas* from Little Way Chapel, a Christmastide devotional for the whole family based on the Twelve Days of Christmas song. That might seem random, but traditionally the twelve numbers have been used to teach about some basic tenets of the faith – and the songs origins may lay in teaching a simplified children's catechism. You'll learn all about what the 12 numbers traditionally stand for, along with a scripture reading, Christmas carol, and prayer for each day. You'll also find ornaments to match each day that you're welcome to cut out and hang upon your tree!

In addition to the *Twelve Days of Christmas* guide, you'll want to check out our Living Liturgically Christmastide page for more ways to celebrate Jesus for the next 12 days!

²¹ Prayer from *The Worship Sourcebook*, Christmas Prayers

Living Liturgically

✻ *Christmastide* ✻

Meal Blessing for Christmastide

God, our Father, we bless you. You so loved the world that you have sent your Son to us, Jesus, the Word made flesh and the Light that dispels all darkness. As we rejoice in you, we ask you to bless this table and the food we share until that day when we all shall feast at your eternal banquet. Amen.²²

Lighting of the Christ Candle

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him. In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

All: And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

(light the center white Christ candle)

Arise, shine;
for your light has come!

All: Let us walk in the light of the Lord.

Christmastide Feasting & Festivities

1. Your "Advent" part of the Advent Wreath is done, but starting on 12/25 the white center candle is lit as you remember Jesus, the Light of the World. Keep lighting your Christ Candle through January 5th (the 12th Day of Christmas).
2. 12/26 is St. Stephen's Day, when the church remembers the Servant Martyr of Acts 6 & 7. Traditionally, it's the day on which the abundance of Christmas is shared with the less fortunate and the "poor boxes" of the church were emptied and distributed to the needy (hence the term "Boxing Day" that you see on your calendars). In honor of Stephen, read his story in scripture and pray for or donate to the poor. If you've received nice gifts that you didn't need, consider passing them onto charity, as well as any items you need to clear out to make more room. You might also want to sing with gusto the hymn "Good King Wenceslaus," which is about St. Wenceslaus' actions "on the feast of Stephen."
3. December 28th marks Holy Innocents Day, which remembers the part of the Christmas story we'd probably rather forget: the deaths of the baby boys in Bethlehem at the hand of King Herod. It's a day to remember how others suffer when we act selfishly, and traditionally, a day to pray for children.
4. December 31st, New Year's Eve, is also known as "Watchnight"—a night to offer prayers of confession and renew commitments to God as the New Year turns over. If you're someone who makes resolutions at the New Year, accompany them with your prayers and consider setting a new spiritual discipline or habit.
5. If you didn't go a-Wassailing before (not to be confused with a-Thomassing, ha!), New Year's is the traditional time to go. Wassail (from "Waes Hael!") means "Good health!" and is probably still a good thing to shout to someone. If you don't physically go a-Wassailing this New Year, consider wishing good health upon people in your prayers.
6. January 1st marks a strange but important day: the day of the circumcision and naming of Jesus (Luke 2:22-40). 8 days after his birth, Jesus' parents took him to the Temple to be circumcised as required by Old Testament Law. The church has continued to remember this day as the "nameday" of Jesus, celebrating how there is "no other name but the name of Jesus" for our salvation. Sing one of the hymns about the Name of Jesus and give thanks!

²² Adapted from the Christmas Season Blessings found in *Blessings of the Table: Mealtime Prayers Throughout the Year* by Brother Victor-Antoine d'Avilea-Latourrette.