



Middlesettlemnts UMC 2022 Advent Devotional

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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:

Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love from The BibleProject

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 word Advent means “coming” or “arrival”—and the season of Advent is a time of looking forward to the advent of Jesus. 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.

While commemorating a season that celebrates God-with-us, we also remember that God is with us even now. 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. 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 hope, peace, joy, and love.

A few organizational notes about MUMC’s 2022 Advent Devotional that you might find helpful as you begin:

- MUMC’s 2022 Advent Devotional particularly meditates on the traditional four Advent words of hope, peace, joy, and love. Each week has a different theme—and matches our theme for worship that morning at church.
- Our 2022 artwork and Monday devotions come from the BibleProject, whose book overview videos we’ve been using at Wednesday Night Bible Study.
- 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. Enjoy a sermon from John Wesley, an older Advent Devo from our current Bishop, and the wisdom of MUMC Saints who have now joined the Church Triumphant.
- Woven throughout are ways for you 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!

- Each Sunday has readings and prayers focusing on the theme for the week. These readings and prayers can also be used along with an Advent Wreath at home. 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.*

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. 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

A Meal Blessing¹ for the 1st Week of Advent

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

A Meal Blessing for the 2nd Week of Advent

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.

A Meal Blessing for the 3rd Week of Advent

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

A Meal Blessing for the 4th Week of Advent

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.

¹ Adapted from the *Advent Blessings in Blessings of the Table: Mealttime Prayers Throughout the Year* by Brother Victor-Antoine d'Avile-Latourrette.

November 27

1st Sunday in Advent

"We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield."

Psalm 33:20

Prayer for Illumination:² LORD, show me your ways, teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long (Psalm 25:4-5).

Read Lamentations 3:19-26

I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him." The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.

Read Psalm 130

Out of the depths I cry to you, LORD; hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. If you, LORD, kept a record of sins, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, so that you may be revered. I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits, and in his word I hope. I wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning. Israel, put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption. He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.

Read 1 Peter 1:3-5, 13-21

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct, for it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." If you invoke as Father the one who judges impartially according to each person's work, live in fear during the time of your exile. You know that you were ransomed from the futile conduct inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. He was destined before the foundation of the world but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake. Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your trust and hope are in God.

Closing Prayer: Eternal God, through long generations you prepared a way for the coming of your Son, and by your Spirit you still bring light to illumine our paths. Renew us in faith and hope that we may welcome Christ to rule our thoughts and claim our love, as Lord of lords and King of kings, to whom be glory always. *Amen.*³

² 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!

³ Prayer for the Day 2, First Sunday in Advent, *Book of Common Worship* (1993)



And now, O Lord what else can I
QAVAH for? You are my YAKHAL.

Psalm 39:7

YAKHAL

HOPE

QAVAH

REBORN into
NEW and
DIFFERENT
KINDS OF HUMANS
1 PETER 1:3

At this moment, the Lord
is hiding his face from
Israel, so I will QAVAH
for Him.
Isaiah 63:17

God's
PAST
Faithfulness that motivates
HOPE FOR THE
FUTURE

WAITING
TENSE
EXPECTATIONS

Hope

Read Romans 8:18-25

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God, for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its enslavement to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning together as it suffers together the pains of labor, and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what one already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

So let's say you want to describe the feeling of anticipating a future that's better than the present. You might be giddy or excited or maybe unsure, but most of us know that experience. We call it hope. It's a state of anticipation, and it's crucial for healthy human existence, and it's a really important concept in the Bible. In fact, there are many words for hope in the ancient languages of the Bible, and they're all fascinating.

In the Old Testament, there are two main Hebrew words translated as hope. The first is *yakhal*, which means simply "to wait for." Like in the story of Noah and the ark, as the flood waters recede, Noah had to *yakhal* for weeks (Genesis 8:6-12).

The other Hebrew word is *qavah*, which also means to wait. It's related to the Hebrew word *qav*, which means cord. When you pull a *qav* tight, you produce a state of tension until there's release. That's *qavah*, the feeling of tension and expectation while you wait for something to happen. The prophet Isaiah depicts God as a farmer who plants vines and *qavahs* for good grapes (Isaiah 28:24-29). Or the prophet Micah talks about farmers who both *qavah* and *yakhal* for morning dew to give moisture to the land (Micah 5:7).

So in biblical Hebrew, hope is about waiting or expectation, but waiting for what? In the period of Israel's prophets, as the nation was sinking into self-destruction, Isaiah said, "At this moment, the Lord's hiding his face from Israel, so I will *qavah* for him (Isaiah 8:17)." The only hope Isaiah had in those dark days was the hope for God himself.

You find this same notion of hope all over the book of Psalms where these words appear over forty times. In almost every case, what people are waiting for is God. Like in Psalm 130, the poet cries out from a pit of despair, "I *qavah* for the Lord ... Let Israel *yakhal* for the Lord, because he's loyal and will redeem Israel from its sins (Psalm 130:5-8)."

Biblical hope is based on a person, which makes it different from optimism. Optimism is about choosing to see, in any situation, how circumstances could work out for the best. But

⁴ from the BibleProject's Word Studies Advent Series: Hope (bibleproject.com/explore/category/advent-series)

biblical hope isn't focused on circumstances. In fact, hopeful people in the Bible often recognize there's no evidence things will get better, but you choose hope anyway.

Like the prophet Hosea, he lived in a dark time when Israel was being oppressed by foreign empires. And he chose hope when he said God could turn this "valley of trouble into a door of hope," like the day when Israel came up from the land of Egypt (Hosea 2:15). God had surprised his people with redemption back in the days of the Exodus, and he could do so again.

So it's God's past faithfulness that motivates hope for the future. You look forward by looking backward, trusting in nothing other than God's character. It's like the poet of Psalm 39 who says, "And now O Lord, what else can I *qavah* for? You are my *yakhal* (Psalm 39:7)."

In the New Testament, the earliest followers of Jesus cultivated this similar habit of hope. They believed that Jesus' life, death, and resurrection was God's surprising response to our slavery to evil and death. The empty tomb opened up a new door of hope, and they used the Greek word *elpis* to describe this anticipation.

The apostle Peter said that Jesus' resurrection opened up a "living hope" that people can be reborn to become new and different kinds of humans (1 Peter 1:3). More than once, the apostle Paul says the good news about Jesus announces "the *elpis* of glory (Romans 5:2; Colossians 1:27)." In both cases, this *elpis* is based on a person, the risen Jesus, who has overcome death.

And this hope wasn't just for humans. The apostles believed that what happened to Jesus in the resurrection was a foretaste of what God had planned for the whole universe. In Paul's words, it's a "hope that creation itself will be liberated from slavery to corruption into freedom when God's children are glorified (Romans 8:21)."

So Christian hope is bold, waiting for humanity and the whole universe to be rescued from evil and death. And some would say it's crazy, and maybe it is. But biblical hope isn't optimism based on the odds. It's a choice to wait for God to bring about a future that's as surprising as a crucified man rising from the dead. Christian hope looks back to the risen Jesus in order to look forward, and so we wait. And that's what the biblical words for hope are all about.

Pray: "A king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength. But the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love, to deliver them from death." Lord, we wait in hope for you—you are our help and shield. In you our hearts rejoice because we trust in your holy name. May your unfailing love be with us, LORD, as we put our hope in you. Amen.⁵

⁵ from Psalm 33:16-22

Remembering the Light

Read Romans 15:13

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In the great epic story by J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, we find a number of characters with whom we might relate. The way each struggles through the story, overcoming the darkness that either comes from within them, or is placed on them through their adventures in Middle Earth.

There is one moment in the third book, *Return of the King*, Frodo Baggins is struggling to hang on and accomplish his task of taking the ring to Mordor, his companion and friend, Samwise Gamgee there by his side and says to him:

It's like the great stories, Mr. Frodo. The ones that really mattered, full of darkness and danger they were. Sometimes you didn't want to know the end, because how could the end be happy. How could the world go back to the way it was when there's so much bad that had happened? But in the end it's only a passing thing, this shadow. Even darkness must pass.

Even the darkness must pass. Aren't those the very words we should remember during the season of advent.

Advent is a season in which we, as the church, remember that the true light has come into the world – the Light of Christ. In our churches, and sometimes in our homes, we light candles each week. These candles represent hope, peace, joy, and love in a wreath. As the days move closer to Christmas the light gets brighter, then on Christmas Eve we light the final candle, the Christ candle. We celebrate the birth of our Lord, as the light of the world, because, in him there is no darkness at all (1 John 1:5).

I don't pretend to know the thoughts of Tolkien as he penned the words of encouragement spoke by Samwise Gamgee, yet, to me, they take on an advent theme of overcoming darkness.

In recent years, we have seen too much darkness in the world, and we might wonder if people have lost the sense of hope that this time usually brings. We might begin to wonder if there will be an end to this current dark time.

My hope is that we might hear the words once more, 'even the darkness must pass.'

Our current darkness is only a passing thing. We, who have a hope in Christ, understand that the people of God have endured many dark times, yet they have overcome. We believe that there are always brighter days ahead, because we are growing ever closer to the Light of the world, Christ our Savior. Christ has overcome, and in Christ we too will overcome

⁶ Sam grew up at Middlesettlements UMC and is currently serving as pastor at St. Mark UMC in Knoxville

this darkness and find joy and laughter, togetherness and peace on the other side of, and sometimes, perhaps even in the middle of this darkness.

The apostle, Paul, closes his letter to the Roman church with encouragement for everyone to work in harmony with one another. His belief in Christ shined like a beacon of light and hope that all peoples (for him Gentile and Jew) would be able to work together towards a kingdom that we might say, is 'already and not yet'. We know that Christ came to earth millennia ago, but we also believe that he will come again. The kingdom that is promised through Christ is one where the light shines and never runs out, where the darkness flees, and where people can live in peace with one another. At times we see this kingdom and so we say it is 'already', but we are also reminded that it is not complete so we say it is 'not yet.' The work done by the church in every season, in advent and beyond is to shine the light of Christ that overcomes the darkness, but especially during advent does this theme ring true.

We, church, are the light shining in this dark world, as we share our light that comes from Christ. We may have darkness in our own stories, shadows of our past may haunt us from time-to-time. However, they are only fleeting moments in the life we now have in Christ. We are reminded that our story does have a happy ending, our hardships will come to an end. Advent reminds us the light that has come, and will come again, and the light of Advent shines brighter in us as we find the hope, peace, joy, and love of centering our lives on Christ, the world's light.

Pray: 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.*⁷

⁷ Prayer from *The Worship Sourcebook*, Christmas Prayers

November 30

Karen Overton Lewis

Read Psalm 71:14–18

As for me, I will always have hope; I will praise you more and more. My mouth will tell of your righteous deeds, of your saving acts all day long—though I know not how to relate them all. I will come and proclaim your mighty acts, Sovereign LORD; I will proclaim your righteous deeds, yours alone. Since my youth, God, you have taught me, and to this day I declare your marvelous deeds. Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, my God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your mighty acts to all who are to come.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:31

So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

I have been volunteering with our youth for around 8 years. It is a blessing to say the least. I remember being their age and dealing with the feeling of waiting for everything and trying to learn to trust that God will make a way. I hear our youth talk about looking forward to big life events... getting their permit, getting their driving license, working and struggling to finish the semester, and praying and discerning what God's plan is for their life. All of these are stressful for young people and they involve a lot of waiting for what is coming. I try to encourage them to be present and to look for how God is working in their life currently and not wish away the present and what God has already provided.

During the Advent Season, it is easy and common to skip over the waiting and the coming and skip to Christmas Day - the arrival. There is so much joy in the waiting and the coming of Christ! Take the time to pray and worship during all of advent. Be present!

Pray: Dear Lord, please help us to be present during this season of waiting. Help us to see you every day in all we do and to notice the ways that you are working for us in big and small ways. Continue to be with the youth of our church and help us support them as they grow in their faith and learn more about you and your word. Amen.



Our Youth's Favorite Christmas Traditions

Emilee Floyd (age 15): Every year on Christmas Eve we get an ornament to bring with us when we move out and have our own tree. We also normally go and explore a town the day after Christmas with some cousins.

Eli Fuson (age 14): My favorite Christmas tradition is the Christmas tree. Because whenever the Christmas tree is up it means it's Christmas time.

Jack Fuson (age 14): One of my favorite Christmas traditions is putting up a Christmas tree. I like doing this because I think that they look good with the lights and decorations.

Andrew Lewis (age 13): Biscuits at my Grandma's house Christmas morning

Wesley Lewis (age 16): My favorite Christmas tradition is going to Grandma's house in the morning and eating breakfast with the family.

Landon Marcus (age 14): Going to my Grammy's, church service and enchiladas for dinner

Tate Romero (age 17): My favorite Christmas tradition is making cookies and getting to open one present the night before. Then I enjoy spending time with my family on Christmas day.

Andrew Sisk (age 14): After the Thanksgiving meal, we always set up the Christmas tree.

Bryson Sisk (age 16): On Christmas morning Leighanne cooks a big breakfast.

Dagen Thomas (age 15): I love to watch Christmas Vacation and Die Hard.

Dawson Wells (age 17): My favorite Christmas tradition is waking up to sing happy birthday to Jesus. We have a small nativity set that is lit up everyday until Christmas. On Christmas Day, we place the star above the nativity and place baby Jesus in his manger of hay. Then as a family we stand around little baby Jesus and sing him happy birthday.

December 1

Rev. Dr. Debra Wallace-Padgett, Bishop of Holston & N. Alabama Conferences
2017 Bishop's Advent Message

Hope in the Plan

Read Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14

This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:

This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." Yes, this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them," declares the LORD.

This is what the LORD says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile."

The story (source unknown) is told of a man strolling by a sandlot ballpark one afternoon. "What's the score?" he called to a boy in the dugout. "We're down - Eighteen to nothing." "Wow!" said the spectator, "I'll bet you're discouraged." "Why should I be discouraged?" asked the little boy. "We haven't even gotten up to bat yet!" I love this little guy's hope in the face of great adversity.

Sometimes we have that kind of hope. But on other occasions financial difficulties overwhelm us, a relationship falls apart, a job situation looks impossible, our health declines or any number of other difficulties wear on us. Our hope runs out.

That is the situation in which the people of Israel find themselves when in Babylonian exile. Then the prophet Jeremiah speaks a word to the people. Sometimes known as "the weeping prophet," this son of a priest from the tribe of Benjamin brings a word of hope to the people of Israel. In essence he writes, "Place your hope in the plan!"

Because God's plan transcends time and place, his word of hope is applicable to us today. Where we *feel* no hope, God *offers* great hope. When we *think* there is no reason for hope,

God *shows* us that hope is never lost. Where we *see* “no way,” God *provides* a way. When we *lose confidence* in our plans, we can be certain in *God’s plan*.

Christ-followers understand Jesus to be the ultimate fulfillment of the plan. Jesus is God’s Son - God came to earth. He was born in a stable in Bethlehem that first Christmas so long ago. He lived in the northern part of Israel in Galilee. He taught . . . prayed . . . healed the sick . . . and forgave sin. Then he did the most courageous and sacrificial act this world has ever known. He died on a cross so that we could know forgiveness for our sins. Here is the most important part of that news . . . Jesus was resurrected from the dead, breaking the chains of sin and death in our lives. In that moment, true hope was born.

If ever we need hope, it is during the Christmas season. Though a wonderful season filled with bright lights and joyful sounds, Christmas is also a hard time for many of us as we remember better days in our past or face the disappointment of our present. Hope is what we find at the manger in Bethlehem. Hope that gives life meaning and purpose . . . that allows us to get through tough days with courage . . . that encourages our spirits . . . brightens our existence . . . and helps us to reach beyond ourselves toward God Almighty. Though hope does not always make sense from this side of heaven, it is the reality that lifts us beyond the challenging circumstances that life on earth brings us.

We may be afraid, but Jesus isn’t. We may not know what to do. But he does. We may feel like giving up. But he doesn’t. Nothing is hopeless to Jesus because he knows the power of God like no other. He is the Son of God, God Incarnate! He has seen God offer second chance after second chance to the human race down through the centuries. During the 30 plus years that he walked this earth he gave hope to people in seemingly impossible circumstances. He is still about the business of offering hope today.

The little guy in the dugout whose team was behind 18-0 maintained hope in the face of seemingly impossible circumstances. After all, his team had not yet come up to bat! Sometimes, we are hope-filled in daunting circumstances, too. On other occasions, though, our hope wanes. When that happens, may Jeremiah’s prophetic word ring loudly and clearly in our ears. Place hope in God’s plan!

Pray: *Faithful God, your promises stand unshaken through all generations. Renew us in hope, that we may be awake and alert watching for the glorious return of Jesus Christ, our judge and savior, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.*⁸

⁸ *Prayer for the Day 1, First Sunday in Advent, Book of Common Worship (1993)*

Waiting Rooms

Read Psalm 27:14

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

Read Lamentations 3:25

The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him.

Read Romans 12:12

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.

It would be very revealing to know how many hours we spend waiting – Dr. and Dentist offices, airports, auto repair shops, traffic lights, elevator doors (pushing and re-pushing the up button), standing in line at the grocery store check-out, on and on. I am sure the number would astound us! In each of these situations we are in a state of anticipation, sometimes anxious anticipation, sometimes dread of possible bad news, but always eager for good news!

Waiting is so intertwined in the fabric of our lives that many popular, secular songs have been written about it. Examples include *Anticipation* by Carly Simon, *Hold on, I'm Comin'* by Sam and Dave, and *Waitin' for the Bus* by ZZ Top (my favorite!).

The Old Testament is rich with prophecies of the arrival of The Messiah, Jesus Christ. The anticipation and excitement among the Jews grew stronger and stronger over the centuries. Then, Jesus was born of The Virgin Mary in a lowly stable in Bethlehem. Hallelujah!

We celebrate Advent each year in a state of joyful waiting and anticipation for Christmas, the birthday of Jesus Christ our Messiah!

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! ⁹

Amen.

⁹ Prayer taken from "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus" by Charles Wesley, 1744

December 3

Staci Crisp Lawhorn & Jason Martin

Read Isaiah 40:31

But those who hope in the Lord, will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:16

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

During this time of year, some may find it difficult maintain hope. December 2021 was a time in our lives that neither of us ever anticipated, nor were we aware of the other's condition. Both having gone through divorce and struggling to get by daily, hope was simply not in our vocabulary.

Jason's mother called to make sure he checked on Staci after she found out about her divorce—the same lady who had stood by her son through some of the toughest things life had to offer. The same lady who had asked Staci if she liked wedding cake the first time she entered her house in 1987. The same lady who always kept up with Staci over the years. The lady who sat with Staci in February during an emotionally hard time. That lady planted seeds by caring for both in different ways over the years.

Staci's mother was busy trying to console Staci while dealing with a recent hip fracture—the same lady who had dealt with the loss of her husband after a tragic accident and had battled health issues herself including cancer. The same lady who fed Jason *Mayfield's Butter Pecan* ice cream in 1987 and took time to watch him play high school football. The same lady who always had time to speak to Jason in public over the years. The same lady that encouraged Staci that Jason really likes you despite her reservations, both then and now. That lady planted seeds.

Joseph and Mary were in a situation not of their making and not of their choice. Logic could not explain it. They could have focused on how, when, and where this happened. Instead, they focused on the good, what they were told was His purpose. By playing an everyday role, they supported one another, developed a story that showed God's presence, and survived all of the inevitable questions, trials, and issues life presented them. All that was asked of them was to be faithful and to continue to live their lives—and the lives they lived would serve as examples for generations of people not understanding how they got where they are but trusting God will take care. They were given hope.

God has done just that for us. In having faith He's been faithful: He's enabled us to find support in one another in a time we were both broken. It's not been easy. He's enabled us to face and focus on many of the good things He actually wants us to experience. He's shown us how to support one another to get through things we may not completely understand or even like. He enables us to overlook all that we may not understand. He's provided us with a peace that neither of us could find on our own. He's provided us family and friends who share life with us and provide encouragement by just doing what they do every single day. He's enabled us to find one another through seeds planted long ago—some evident, others not so clear, but they all matter.

Pray: *God of all hope, thank you for your faithfulness, even when we can't make sense of our circumstances. Open our hearts in welcome, that your Son, Jesus Christ, at his coming may find in us a dwelling prepared for him, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.*¹⁰

¹⁰ from the Prayer of Invocation 11, *The Worship Sourcebook*

December 4

2nd Sunday in Advent

"I have seen their ways, but I will heal them; I will guide them and restore comfort to Israel's mourners. Peace, peace, to those far and near," says the Lord. "And I will heal them."

from Isaiah 57:18-19

Prayer for Illumination:¹¹ Guide us, O God, by your Word and Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover your peace, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Read Isaiah 9:2, 6-7

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. 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. 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.

Read Psalm 85:8-11

I will listen to what God the LORD says; he promises peace to his people, his faithful servants—but let them not turn to folly. Surely his salvation is near those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land. Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other. Faithfulness springs forth from the earth, and righteousness looks down from heaven.

Read Ephesians 2:6-10, 12-17, 19-21

God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. Therefore, remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Closing Prayer: Eternal God, in this world trouble comes, but you speak to us courage and peace. Remind us to take heart, for you have overcome the world. *Amen.*¹²

¹¹ 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!

¹² from John 14:27 and 16:33



Peace

Read Luke 1:67-79

His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his child David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness in his presence all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins. Because of the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to shine upon those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

The word peace is common in most languages. People can talk about peace treaties or times of peace; it means the absence of war. And in the Bible, the word peace can refer to the absence of conflict, but it also points to the presence of something better in its place.

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for peace is *shalom*, and in the New Testament the Greek word is *eirene*. The most basic meaning of *shalom* is complete or whole. The word can refer to a stone that has a perfect whole shape with no cracks. It can also refer to a completed stone wall that has no gaps and no missing bricks. *Shalom* refers to something that's complex with lots of pieces that's in a state of completeness, wholeness.

It's like Job who says his tents are in a state of *shalom* because he counted his flock and no animals are missing (Job 5:24). This is why *shalom* can refer to a person's well-being. Like when David visited his brothers on the battlefield, he asked about their *shalom* (1 Samuel 17:22-23). The core idea is that life is complex, full of moving parts and relationships and situations, and when any of these is out of alignment or missing, your *shalom* breaks down. Life is no longer whole. It needs to be restored.

In fact, that's the basic meaning of *shalom* when you use it as a verb. To bring *shalom* literally means to make complete or restore. So Solomon brings *shalom* to the unfinished temple when he completes it (1 Kings 9:1; 2 Chronicles 7:11). Or if your animal accidentally damages your neighbor's field, you *shalom* them by giving them a complete repayment for their loss. You take what's missing, and you restore it to wholeness.

The same goes for human relationships. In the book of Proverbs, to reconcile and heal a broken relationship is to bring *shalom*. And when rival kingdoms make *shalom* in the Bible, it doesn't just mean they stop fighting. It also means they start working together for each other's benefit.

¹³ from the BibleProject's Word Studies Advent Series: Peace (bibleproject.com/explore/category/advent-series)

This state of *shalom* is what Israel's kings were supposed to cultivate, and it rarely happened. So the prophet Isaiah, he looked forward to a future king, a prince of *shalom*. And his reign would bring *shalom* with no end—a time when God would make a covenant of *shalom* with his people and make right all wrongs and heal all that's been broken (Isaiah 9).

This is why Jesus's birth in the New Testament was announced as the arrival of *eirene* (Luke 2:14). Remember that's the Greek word for peace. Jesus came to offer his peace to others like when he said to his followers, "My peace I give to you all (John 14:27)."

The apostles claimed that Jesus made peace between messed up humans and God when he died and rose from the dead. The idea is that he restored to wholeness the broken relationship between humans and their Creator. This is why the apostle Paul can say Jesus himself is our *eirene*. He was the whole, complete human that I am made to be but have failed to be, and now he gives me his life as a gift. And this means that Jesus' followers are now called to create peace.

Paul instructed local churches to keep their unity through the bond of peace, which requires humility and patience and bearing with others in love (Ephesians 4:3). Becoming people of peace means participating in the life of Jesus, who reconciled all things in heaven on earth, restoring peace through his death and resurrection.

So peace takes a lot of work because it's not just the absence of conflict. True peace requires taking what's broken and restoring it to wholeness, whether it's in our lives, our relationships, or in our world. And that's the rich biblical concept of peace.

Pray: *God of all peoples, your servant John came baptizing and calling for repentance. Help us to hear his voice of judgment, that we may also rejoice in his word of promise, and be found pure and blameless in that glorious Day when Christ comes to rule the earth as Prince of Peace. Amen.*¹⁴

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 humble 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.

¹⁴ *Prayer for the Day 1, Second Sunday in Advent, Book of Common Worship (1993)*

December 6

The Feast of Saint Nicholas¹⁵

Sam Love

Read Numbers 28:1-2 KJV

And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, "Command the children of Israel, and say unto them, My offering, and my bread for my sacrifices made by fire, for a sweet savour unto me, shall ye observe to offer unto me in their due season."

Advent is not only a season of anticipation of the celebration of Jesus' birth and coming to save the world, but also his second coming to retrieve his children.

Advent is also a season of remembrance, a time when our minds wander back to warm and nostalgic memories.

One of the fondest memories I have is that of the wonderful smells and aromas that are afforded by the season. We could open the door and the kitchen would pour forth essences of turkey and dressing, cranberries, pies, and all our favorite dishes. One of my favorites was the citrus smell of Ambrosia that was a specialty of both my grandmother Love and her sister Auntie Bailey. If you are familiar with this offering, I am sure you are aware of how labor intensive it is. It was a dish filled with love. You can look at the Loves and tell eating was a big part of our enjoyment!

As we continued through the house we could smell the hint of smoke coming from the roaring fire. In another part of the house we were met with the wonderful scent of evergreen from wreaths, garland, and the grand Christmas tree. It seemed to me – and still does – that the scent given by the evergreen trees is stronger, cleaner, and fresher at Christmas than any other time of the year.

I read in the Bible passages referring to a "sweet savour" and am reminded of the aromas mentioned above. I also think of frankincense being highly valued and given as a precious gift to the Christ Child.

God commanded his people that they offer sacrifices of their best and most precious livestock, fruits, grains – the best of the best – to his glory. Those that feel short He would neither acknowledge nor accept. The pleasing offerings were a "sweet savour" unto Him. I pray that as we enter this blessed season that we so order our lives that they may be a "sweet savour" unto the Lord.

Pray: Almighty God, may the aromas of the season remind us to live generously for your glory, that our lives may be a "sweet savour" to you. Let the fire of your Spirit purge us of greed and selfishness, so that we may find our peace in you and you may delight in us. We ask this through him whose coming is certain, whose day draws near, your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. *Amen.*¹⁶

¹⁵ December 6 marks the church holiday of the Feast of Saint Nicholas (270-345 AD).

¹⁶ from *Prayer for the Day 3, Third Sunday in Advent, Book of Common Worship (1993)*

Feasting & Festivities in honor of Jolly Old St. Nick

December 6 marks the church holiday of the Feast of Saint Nicholas, a Bishop in the early church who became *legendary* for his generosity, especially during Christmas. In honor of Jesus' birthday, he would anonymously give presents to the poor—he'd toss gold in through a window or send gifts down the chimney (people still found out it was him). When he died in 345 AD, his generous ways had inspired others and presents continued to appear in celebration of Jesus' birth.

There are fun traditions for celebrating St. Nick's Day all over the world! On the night of December 5, stockings and shoes are set by the fireplace 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. If you're looking for something simpler, consider celebrating the day by reciting the Nicene Creed, giving secret gifts/blessings to others, and eating at least one candy cane.



*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 blessing:

Lord, bless this tree around which we will make many memories this Advent season.

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.

Help us to make room in our hearts for You. Amen.

December 7

Robin Turnmire

Read Matthew 24:44-51

So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him. "Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, 'My master is staying away a long time,' and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The wise servant diligently does his duty no matter the timing. The evil servant has lost faith – given up – because Jesus did not match his expectations. I believe all of us have a tendency to lose focus, which is why we need our fellow believers to call our attention to it when we do. The true problem is allowing the world to influence our actions and beliefs, instead of the other way around. We ALL are given the dual responsibilities of reaching the outcast and tending the needs of other faithful servants around us. If we lose our focus on either one, by changing our ways to match those in our circle who are unbelievers or by failing to recognize in love that we have wounded our brothers and sisters, then we are at risk for becoming evil, hypocritical foolish servants who will be caught unaware and cast out when He returns.

Sharing our Master's generous grace with the outcast is a command from Jesus. Yet, getting caught up in worldly matters is a known danger. But later in this private sermon to His disciples, Jesus tells the parable of burying our talent as also sinful and wicked. Being scared of the world's influence and frozen into inaction comes too easily also.

So how do we find the balance of steadily working for our Master – doing His wishes of both outreach and caring for our fellow believers without allowing the world to pull us away from Him? The complex problem of maintaining both holiness and unity is rooted in this delicate balance of outreach and supporting other believers. Personally, I have been guilty of sticking my head in the sand because I felt undecided/unclear and fundamentally afraid of making wrong decisions. I am not qualified to interpret Scripture, but as a Christian I am ready to use my talent as a systems-trained family counselor. This balance is very badly in need of readjustment:

1. Outreach has taken priority over serving one another
- AND
2. Holiness has taken precedence over unity.

When done wrongly, our efforts to discern and decide lead to very public hypocrisy in our actions, both corporately and as individuals (Ex: posting ugly things on social media or snubbing someone who did). To rebalance this, those prioritizing outreach desperately need to focus on also spending time and effort humbly serving believers already in the

body of Christ, especially those who view current trends as succumbing to the pressures of the world. Likewise and simultaneously, those appalled at the way the church seems to be embracing the ways of the world are desperately called to remember that unity means being willing to hear, even over and over again, those who feel we are not reaching far enough according to Jesus' loving example of including sinners. Both sides are responsible to and for each other. Both sides need to come back to the table of the Lord with a renewed focus of praying and listening to our Master.

Pray with me this Advent season that we may each find a way to increase the communion of the fellowship of believers, intentionally reaching to those who seem to be across the divide, so that as we celebrate Christmas we may truly find peace lest He return and find us in our current messy, unfaithful condition.

Pray: Almighty God, you have made us and all things to serve you, now prepare the world for your rule. Come quickly to save us, so that wars and violence shall end, and your children may live in peace, honoring one another and your mission with faithful service, witness, purity, and unity; through Jesus Christ, who lives in power with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.¹⁷

¹⁷ from *Prayer for the Day 1, Third Sunday in Advent, Book of Common Worship (1993)*

December 8

from 1750's "Sermon 39: Catholic¹⁸ Spirit"

Rev. John Wesley (1703 - 1791)

Read Romans 14:1-13

Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand. One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. It is written: "'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before me; every tongue will acknowledge God.'" So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God. Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister.

There is a peculiar love which we owe to those that love God. This is that love on which the Apostle John so frequently and strongly insists. 'This', said he, 'is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another' (1 John 4:7-8). 'Not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation of our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another' (1 John 4:10-11).

All men approve of this. But do all men practice it? Daily experience shows the contrary. Where are even the Christians who 'love one another, as he hath given us commandment'? How many hindrances lie in the way! The two grand, general hindrances are, first, that they can't all think alike; and in consequence of this, secondly, they can't all walk alike. But although a difference in opinions or modes of worship may prevent an entire external union, yet need it prevent our union in affection? Though we can't think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences. These remaining as they are, they may forward one another in love and in good works.

'Tis very possible that many good men now also may entertain peculiar opinions. And 'tis certain, so long as 'we know' but 'in part', that all men will not see all things alike. It is an unavoidable consequence of the present weakness and shortness of human understanding that several men will be of several minds, in [faith] as well as in common life. So it has been from the beginning of the world, and so it will be 'till the restitution of all things'. Nay farther: although every man necessarily believes that every particular opinion which he holds is true (for to believe any opinion is not true is the same thing as not to hold it) yet can no man be assured that all his own opinions taken together are true. Nay, every thinking man is assured they are not, seeing *humanum est errare et nescire*¹⁹ – to be ignorant of many things, and to mistake in some, is the necessary condition of humanity. This therefore, he is sensible, in his own case. He knows in the general that he himself is mistaken; although in what particulars he mistakes he does not, perhaps cannot, know.

¹⁸ "catholic" here means "universal" and comes from the Greek word for "whole."

¹⁹ Meaning roughly "it is the human lot to err and to not know"

We must [each] act as each is fully persuaded in his own mind. Hold you fast that which you believe is most acceptable to God, and I will do the same. I believe the Episcopal form of church government to be scriptural and apostolical. If you think the Presbyterian or Independent is better, think so still, and act accordingly. I believe infants ought to be baptized; and that this may be done either by dipping or sprinkling. If you are otherwise persuaded, be so still, and follow your own persuasion. It appears to me, that forms of prayer are of excellent use, particularly in the great congregation. If you judge extemporary prayer to be of more use, act suitable to your own judgement. My sentiment is, that I ought not to forbid water, wherein persons may be baptized; and that I ought to eat bread and drink wine, as a memorial of my dying Master: however, if you are not convinced of this act according to the light you have. I have no desire to dispute with you one moment upon any of the preceding heads. Let all these smaller points stand aside. Let them never come into sight "If thine heart is as my heart," if thou lovest God and all mankind, I ask no more: "give me thine hand."

One inference we may make from what has been said. We may learn from hence, what is a catholic spirit. There is scarce any expression which has been more grossly misunderstood, and more dangerously misapplied, than this: but it will be easy for any who calmly consider the preceding observations, to correct any such misapprehensions of it, and to prevent any such misapplication.

For, from hence we may learn, first, that a catholic spirit not an indifference to all opinions. This is the spawn of hell, not the offspring of heaven. This unsettledness of thought, this being "driven to and fro, and tossed about with every wind of doctrine," is a great curse, not a blessing, an irreconcilable enemy, not a friend, to true catholicism. Observe this, you who know not what spirit ye are of: who call yourselves men of a catholic spirit, only because you are of a muddy understanding; because your mind is all in a mist; because you have no settled, consistent principles, but are for jumbling all opinions together. Be convinced, that you have quite missed your way; you know not where you are. You think you are got into the very spirit of Christ; when, in truth, you are nearer the spirit of Antichrist. Go, first, and learn the first elements of the gospel of Christ, and then shall you learn to be of a truly catholic spirit.

If, then, we take this word in the strictest sense, a man of a catholic spirit is one who, in the manner above-mentioned, gives his hand to all whose hearts are right with his heart: one who knows how to value, and praise God for, all the advantages he enjoys, with regard to the knowledge of the things of God, the true scriptural manner of worshipping him, and, above all, his union with a congregation fearing God and working righteousness: one who, retaining these blessings with the strictest care, keeping them as the apple of his eye, at the same time loves--as friends, as brethren in the Lord, as members of Christ and children of God, as joint partakers now of the present kingdom of God, and fellow heirs of his eternal kingdom--all, of whatever opinion or worship, or congregation, who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ; who love God and man; who, rejoicing to please, and fearing to offend God, are careful to abstain from evil, and zealous of good works. He is the man of a truly catholic spirit, who bears all these continually upon his heart; who having an unspeakable tenderness for their persons, and longing for their welfare, does not cease to commend them to God in prayer, as well as to plead their cause before men; who speaks comfortably to them, and labours, by all his words, to strengthen their hands in God. He assists them to the uttermost of his power in all things, spiritual and temporal. He is ready "to spend and be spent for them;" yea, to lay down his life for their sake.

Thou, O man of God, think on these things! If thou art already in this way, go on. If thou hast heretofore mistook the path, bless God who hath brought thee back! And now run the race which is set before thee, in the royal way of universal love. Take heed, lest thou be either wavering in thy judgement, or straitened in thy bowels: but keep an even pace, rooted in the faith once delivered to the saints, and grounded in love, in true catholic love, till thou art swallowed up in love for ever and ever!

Pray: Eternal God, grant us wisdom, discernment, and love, that we too may prepare the way for Christ who is coming in power and glory to establish his kingdom of peace and reconciliation; through Jesus Christ our Judge and our Redeemer, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever. Amen.

New Beginnings and Change

Read 2 Corinthians 3:18, 5:17

But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new

In his 2nd letter to the people of Corinth, Paul begins telling the people of Corinth to take comfort in the Lord and to “trust not in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead.” Two of his themes in this letter are: (1) God can work through us no matter who we are, and (2) Faith in God brings new life.

When I read these ideas, I began to connect these thoughts to my own life and the lives of my family members. How is God transforming and working through me and my family, and how are we becoming more like Jesus and working to serve others?

My school is presently undergoing countless renovations by changing our middle school configuration to a 6-12 school. Presently, we have added 2 new grade levels, more than 30 new teachers, and our building looks like a war zone. There are big track hoes, dump trucks, and machinery of every kind right outside of my windows. They start digging and grinding at 7:30 every morning, and will continue until sometime next fall if we're lucky.

At my house, my daughter has just started a new job teaching and helping coach softball, her fiancé, Mitch, has also started a new graphics design job, and my husband, Bobby, is in the process of starting a new car show in the Nashville area. Many of my nieces have also started new jobs or are about to make changes in their lives. Maggie is expecting a new baby, Grace and Eden are just married or getting married very soon. The theme that resonates all around me is “change and new beginnings.”

In the midst of all of these stressful situations, I am always amazed at how God is working and changing everyone involved in the process. Even through the most stressful times in our lives, there's always something positive if we can only trust in God, tune out the noise, and look for the good. Debbie Rice, who authored one of the Upper Room devotionals stated, “When we open our lives to God, we invite the Almighty to change and mold us in ways that improve our lives. As our Creator, God moves within us so that we become more like Christ. When the Lord's work in us is complete, we will be astonished by how we have been changed.”

This advent season, may we embrace the new beginnings and changes in our lives and look for God's presence.

Pray: Heavenly Father, help us to open our hearts to you and create space for your Spirit to move within us. Guide us as we begin new seasons of our lives and help us to take comfort in You. In Your Holy Name we pray, Amen.

December 10

Kathy Puckett

Read Luke 2:6-7

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her first born, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Just the other day, I was taking care of my newest great nephew, Brooks. He is two months old and, of course, adorable and cuddly. But Brooks is also extremely helpless, even needing support for his neck as he learns to hold his head up. He is completely dependent on the adult caring for him for everything he needs. Without that help, he would not survive.

Watching him sleep in my arms, I began to think about another helpless baby born long ago in a manger. A baby born in much more dire circumstances than my little Brooks was born in. Brooks was born into a setting where he and his mother had all the latest medical technology available to assist his birth process. He spent ten days in the NICU, and the medical help, along with much prayer, saved his life. The baby named Jesus had not even a proper cradle nor hygienic surroundings in which to be born. Jesus was in a barn surrounded by animals. We don't know how much help Mary had, probably Joseph and maybe someone he persuaded to help him. The contrast in these two births is stark in the difference.

Why would Jesus agree to come to earth as a helpless baby? The King of Kings humbled himself to the most helpless stage of human life. He allowed himself to be born into dire circumstances. Actually, dangerous circumstances because Herod entered the picture to try to harm Him. Why would He do that?

Jesus experienced what each of us experience from the womb to the grave. He lived life with all its difficulties and joys. Then he laid down his life by his choice to follow his Father's will. Why would he do that? We are why He did it. We are the reason he became a baby. We are the reason he lived on earth and walked among us and taught us how to follow God. We are the reason he suffered death on the cross. We are the reason for his glorious resurrection.

I am so thankful and glad Jesus decided to become a helpless baby and come to earth to save us all. It means little Brooks and his brothers and all children everywhere have the opportunity to be children of God and follow Jesus all their lives. That's why Jesus came.

A final thought. One thing both baby Brooks and baby Jesus have in common are mothers to care for them with loving tenderness. We are told that Mary pondered in her heart the things told her about her baby son. I imagine my niece ponders in her heart about her little son also. My prayer is that mothers everywhere will lead their babies and children gently to the baby in the manger who grew up to give them eternal life. *Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these (Matthew 19:14).*

Pray: Dear Father, Thank you for baby Jesus in the manger. Thank you for Jesus on the cross. Thank you for the resurrection of Jesus. Give us the wisdom and strength to lead our babies and children to Jesus. Amen.

December 11

3rd Sunday in Advent

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! The Lord is near."

Philippians 4:4, 5b

Prayer for Illumination:²⁰ Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may heart your Word with joy. Amen.

Read Isaiah 35:3-6, 8a, 9-10

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. And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness; it will be for those who walk on that Way. 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 Psalm 126

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them." The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy. Restore our fortunes, LORD, like streams in the Negev. Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.

Read 1 Peter 1:6-12a

In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls. Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven.

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.*²¹

²⁰ 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!

²¹ Collect for the Second Sunday in Advent, *Book of Common Prayer* (1979)



Joy

Read Habakkuk 3:16-19

I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled. Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us. Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights.

Being in a good mood is really great, and most languages have lots of words to describe the experience like happy, cheerful, joyful, and so on. The same goes for the languages of the Bible. In ancient biblical Hebrew there's a variety of words like *simcha*, *sason*, or *giyl*, and in the Greek New Testament there's *chara*, *euphrosune*, or *agalliasis*. Each word has its own unique nuance, but they all basically refer to the feeling of joy and happiness. Now what makes these biblical joy words interesting is noticing the kinds of things that bring happiness and also seeing how joy is a key theme that runs through the whole story of the Bible.

Let's start with sources of joy. On page one of the Bible, God says that this world is "very good." And so naturally people find joy in beautiful and good things of life, like growing flocks or an abundant harvest on the hills (Psalm 65:11-12). The poet of Psalm 104 says a good bottle of wine is God's gift "to bring joy to people's hearts (Psalm 104:15)." People find joy at a wedding (Jeremiah 33:11) or in their children (Proverbs 23:24-25). There's even a Hebrew proverb that compares the joy that perfume brings to your nose with the joy a good friend brings to your heart (Proverbs 27:9).

However, human history isn't just a joyfest. The biblical story shows how we live in a world that's been corrupted by our own selfishness. It's marked by death and loss, and this is where biblical faith offers a unique perspective on joy. It's an attitude God's people adopt, not because of happy circumstances but because of their hope in God's love and promise.

So when the Israelites were suffering from slavery in Egypt, God raised up Moses to lead them into freedom, and the first thing the Israelites did was sing for joy. Even though they were in the middle of a desert. They were vulnerable; the promised land was still far away. They rejoiced anyway. Later biblical poets looked back on this story and they remembered how the Lord "caused his people to leave with joy, his chosen ones with shouts of joy (Psalm 105:43)."

This joy in the wilderness, this was a defining moment, a way of saying that the joy of God's people is not determined by their struggles but by their future destiny.

²² from the BibleProject's Word Studies Advent Series: Joy (bibleproject.com/explore/category/advent-series)

This theme appears later in Israel's story when Israel suffered under the oppression of foreign empires. The prophet Isaiah looked for the day when God would raise up a new deliverer like Moses. That's when "those redeemed by the Lord will return to Zion with glad shouts, with eternal joy crowning their heads; happiness and joy will overtake them (Isaiah 51:11)." And while the Israelites waited, they chose joy to anticipate their future redemption.

This is why it's significant that when Jesus of Nazareth was born, it was announced as "good news that brings great joy (Luke 2:10)." We're told that Jesus himself "rejoiced and gave thanks to God his Father" (Luke 10:21) when he began to announce the Kingdom of God. He even taught his followers the same joy in the wilderness, saying, "When people reject and persecute you for following me, rejoice, be very glad, because your reward is great in heaven (Matthew 5:12)."

After his death and resurrection, Jesus commissioned his followers to go out and announce the good news that he was the risen King of the world. And as they did so, the early Christian communities were known for being full of joy, even when they were persecuted (Acts 5:41). Like when the apostle Paul was sitting in a dirty Roman prison, he could say that he's chosen joy even if he gets executed (Philippians 3:1). He called this the "joy of faith," or "joy in the Lord." He believed it was the gift of God's Spirit (Romans 15:13), a sign that Jesus' presence is with you, inspiring hope in the midst of hardship. And when you believe that Jesus' love has overcome death itself, joy becomes reasonable in the darkest of circumstances.

Now this doesn't mean you ignore or suppress your sorrow. That's not healthy or necessary. Paul often expressed his grief about missing loved ones or losing friends or his own freedom. He called it "being full of sorrow and yet rejoicing (2 Corinthians 6:10)." As he acknowledged his pain, he also made a choice to trust Jesus that his loss wouldn't be the final word.

This is very different from the trite advice to "turn that frown upside-down." Christian joy is a profound decision of faith and hope in the power of Jesus' own life and love. And that's what biblical joy is all about.

*Pray: Who are we, Lord God, that you should come to us? Yet you have visited your people and redeemed us in your Son. As we prepare to celebrate his birth, make our hearts leap for joy at the sound of your word, and move us by your Spirit to bless your wonderful works. We ask this through him whose coming is certain, whose day draws near, your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.*²³

²³ *Prayer for the Day 3, Fourth Sunday in Advent, Book of Common Worship (1993)*

December 13

Julia Keylon

Read Psalm 95:6

Come let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!

Sing "O Come, All Ye Faithful"

*O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant,
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem;
Come and behold him, born the King of angels.
O come, let us adore him, O come, let us adore him,
O come let us adore him, Christ, the Lord!*

*Yea, Lord, we greet thee, born this happy morning,
Jesus, to thee be all glory given;
Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing;
O come, let us adore him, O come, let us adore him,
O come let us adore him, Christ, the Lord!*

I remember that first year that Christmas Day was a letdown. It was the year my gifts weren't toys. I didn't want Christmas Day to only be for children. I wanted Christmas to be special for me and I looked for how I could get that.

During the Christmas Season, I went to church, sang Christmas carols, read advent devotionals. I also decorated, bought gifts, gave to others, and made cookies. I kept the traditional Christmas season schedule, but I still did not have that celebratory feeling on the day of Christmas that I wanted.

Then one year, when Christmas fell on a Sunday, I discovered the joy of Christmas. Worshiping in church that Sunday I looked around and thought "*this is my family. We are celebrating together in Christ's Church on His birthday. It's His birthday that the world is celebrating. What better place to be than in His Church with His people worshipping Him.*" That is Christmas. I had the excitement of celebration I wanted.

Psalm 95:6 says, "let us worship and bow down." When we worship together at Christmas, it is special. When we, the faithful, come together and joyfully and triumphantly behold Him, it is special. I look forward to us all coming together and beholding our King on Christmas morning.

Pray: Father, I pray that our church would rejoice in coming together and worshipping You as we look forward to your coming. Amen.

December 14

David Wells

Read Psalm 9:1-2, 7-11

I will give thanks to you, LORD, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds. I will be glad and rejoice in you; I will sing the praises of your name, O Most High. The LORD reigns forever; he has established his throne for judgment. He rules the world in righteousness and judges the peoples with equity. The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. Those who know your name trust in you, for you, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek you. Sing the praises of the LORD, enthroned in Zion; proclaim among the nations what he has done.

Everyone seems to deeply love Christmas. I know that is not 100% true but certainly the overwhelming majority. Christians and non-Christians alike embrace the holiday in all the different meanings that it takes on. Retailers not only love the holiday but are entirely dependent on its draw for profitability and survival. Most houses of worship retool themselves and put countless hours of work and untold amounts of money collectively into the Christmas season culture. Who can deny the “most wonderful time of the year”’s effects.

You might be saying to yourself “Here it comes”. Expecting the big “but” statement of how our focus is wrong and how our priorities are out of order. Not the case. Christmas can in fact be all that it is and then some. Bring it on is what I am saying. Let’s blow this thing up into the biggest party ever!!! Pull out all the resources.

Just take a minute though as you read this advent devotion to stop for a second and consider how often you tell the story of Jesus inside or outside of the Christmas season. I’ll be the first to admit how poorly I am to keep that in the front filter of my brain on a daily basis. We so easily make our daily lives about us and what we need or want to achieve. Jesus himself said that our core mission is to “Go tell the world about me (Matt 28).” So take this directive straight from him, not me. In fact, below is a song many know so well that encourages us to do this very thing each and every day of the year. You might even get to hear it during one of our Christmas songs coming soon.

Tell me the story of Jesus (Verse 1):

*Tell me the story of Jesus write on my heart every word
Tell me the story most precious sweetest that ever was heard
Tell how the angels in chorus sang as they welcomed his birth
Glory to Thy in the highest peace and good tidings to earth*

Have a wonderful Christmas season telling others all about HIM.

Pray: Lord, we rejoice in you and give thanks for all that you have done. You are worthy of all our praise, in both our prayers and our testimonies. May we joyously proclaim your good news. Amen.

December 15

from MUMC's 1989 Advent Devotional
Nancy Brown (1939 - 2020)

Being Satisfied

Read Philippians 4:11b-13

For I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

God teaches us many things through great people.

One marvelous lady in her mid-nineties stated to me one day, "Nancy, when I was young I was 16, and my husband was 17. We had nothing but a corn field, but we were so content and happy. Today, I have noticed so many people are not satisfied. 'This is wrong and that is wrong.' What is the reason our people are not satisfied and content?"

I tried to reflect on my own life concerning this observation. All we have belongs to God. We need to praise Him and find peace and joy in life. In Christ Jesus, we are assured He will be with us whatever we go through. We have a heavenly home and this should bring us great inner peace and satisfaction. As the Apostle Paul states, "for I have learned in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content."

Pray: O Lord Jesus Christ, whose first coming brought joy to your waiting people, keep us in faith and joy as we eagerly await your coming again. Amen.²⁴

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 you're 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...

²⁴ Prayer of Invocation 16, *The Worship Sourcebook*

December 16

LeAnne Moore

Read Luke 2:19

But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.

As a mom, I think Mary would have been a scrapbooker. According to this verse, she knew how important it was to cherish a moment, treasure memories and savor every minute. We hear it all the time..."slow down", "be present", "stop and smell the roses" ...and I think we get tired of hearing it because it's so much easier said than done. But here, in the middle of the Christmas story, we see it played out. We see Mary taking the time to treasure the moments and ponder all the things that are going on with her precious baby King. It is a reminder for us to do the same. In the blink of an eye our kids are older, we are older, and time has simply gotten away from us. It's easy to miss so many moments that are true and often recognized gifts from God, therefore it's important for each of us to take a page from Mary's scrapbook and take the time to ponder the things Christ has done for us this year.

Ponder and Praise Him for the unexpected blessings that He has given us, remembering to be grateful for so many things that easily go unnoticed.

Ponder and Praise Him for the undeserved grace that He has lavished on us, relishing in the fact that He is so faithful when we are unfaithful.

Ponder and Praise Him for the unwanted trails that He has used to grow us, recognizing His Sovereign hand in all that goes on in our lives.

During this Christmas season, slow down and take the time to treasure all these things and ponder them in your heart.

Pray: *Holy God, you are forever faithful! Thank you for your blessings, for your grace, and for your Sovereignty! Lord, help us to slow down and be present this season. May we take time to ponder the greatest gift of all, your Son! In the precious name of Jesus, Amen.*

Christmas Card Prayers²⁵

Around the dinner table this week (or at bedtime), gather any 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."*

²⁵ from *Little Way Advent: An Advent Calendar & Guide for Families* by Alyssa French Case

December 17

Magan Stubblefield

Read Zephaniah 3:14, 16-17

Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem! On that day they will say to Jerusalem, "Do not fear, Zion; do not let your hands hang limp. The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you but will rejoice over you with singing."

Read Philippians 4:4-9

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. 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. Finally, brothers & sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

Generally speaking, I'm a happy person. But the stresses of 2020-2021 made it...harder to be happy. It was then I remembered the *discipline* of joy. It's not always possible to maintain the discipline of joy—there's hormonal imbalances and situations that go beyond normal stresses. But that wasn't my case in 2020-2021: I had simply found that life wasn't as fun as it usually was and that my joy was a whole lot less.

The discipline of joy is easy to grasp but hard to practice: you choose to trust that God is at work for good, even in the middle of the mess you're in. For me, that means reminding myself of the good I can see already and forcing myself to act on the good I can't see:

Practices that remind me of the good I can see already:

- Giving thanks to God for specific blessings (my family, the taste of my morning coffee, my favorite song, the book I'm reading, my earrings, the color pink, a home)
- Enjoying my blessings – not just giving thanks for them, but actually being present for them. This is particularly true for my children: I love them and give thanks for them, but then forget to enjoy them because I'm stressing about something else when they're around. This is also true for me with food: I love it, but find myself distracted when I eat, either playing with my phone or reading a commentary, but not paying attention to what I'm tasting.

Practices that force me to act on the good I can't yet see:

- Praying in general – when I pray I have to trust that God is working out all the things that I can't figure out how it's going to work out. Praying for me isn't always a comfort, but an act of faith that forces me to hand over control and stress to God.
- Celebrating God's story – so many of the practices we have listed in this devotion are ways of trusting God's promises that he will come again or that his ways really are the best way to live. Telling and celebrating the story forces me to trust that His story and His words matter, for me and for the world.

Whether we're in a season where joy comes naturally or needs to be a discipline, may you *rejoice* in God and his wonderful work in you and the world.

Pray: *God of Joy, you take great delight in your people and call us to rejoice with you. May we be a people who so trust in your promises and goodness that we can have joy in all circumstances. Amen.*

Mom's Pan Dressing

Joyce Overton

- 1 ¼ cup chopped celery
- ½ cup chopped onion
- ¼ stick margarine
- 1 tsp poultry seasoning
- 1 can cream of chicken soup
- ½ tablespoon sage
- 1 egg
- 6 cups corn breadcrumbs

Brown celery and onions in the margarine. Add the other ingredients and place in a (greased) 9x13 pyrex dish or large iron skillet. Bake for 30 minutes at 350 degrees.

This recipe is handy because you can make the cornbread a day ahead of time.

From Joyce Overton: This is my sweet mother's recipe (Anna Ruth Reed Stooksbury). My mother fixed it for our family Thanksgiving and sometimes at Christmas, and she didn't have a recipe. She learned how to make it from her mother (whom I never knew). Several years before she died, we started working on a recipe. She would dump it in the bowl, and I would take it out a measure it. We worked on it every year until she was satisfied with it. I make it every Thanksgiving using her recipe for my family.

Since my kids were small, our family tradition is that on Christmas morning, we have a country breakfast with all the trimmings at my house. After breakfast, we would go to Clinton and Norris to visit with family, so I have never fixed a big Christmas dinner. When my mother was able, we packed all the Christmas gifts and made our way to her house on Christmas Eve. As she got older and couldn't manage all of us at her home, we would bring her to our house, and she would have Christmas with us. After we opened packages and had our traditional breakfast, we would take her home in Clinton and visit our relatives.

A few years back, I started experimenting with Breakfast Casseroles. My family became very concerned that I was messing with tradition. I had to explain to them that I would add something. After trying several recipes, we decided on Helen Lifford's favorite recipe. Helen passed in 2020. She was indeed a good friend, and we all miss her.

Helen Lifford's Breakfast Casserole

- 1 lb bulk pork sausage
- 1 8oz can crescent rolls
- 2 cups (8oz) shredded Monterey Jack Cheese (usually found at Kroger's; substitute Colby/Jack if needed)
- 4 eggs beaten
- ¾ cup milk
- 1/8 tsp pepper

Crumble and cook sausage in a skillet until browned. Drain and set aside. Unroll crescent roll dough, making a rectangle. Line bottom and ½ inch up sides on lightly greased 9 x 13 baking dish with the rectangle, pressing seams securely to seal. Sprinkle sausage over the dough. Top with shredded cheese. Combine eggs, milk, and pepper; pour over casserole. Bake at 400 for 18-20 minutes.

More 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!

December 18

4th Sunday in Advent

"The LORD loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love"

Psalm 33:5

Prayer for Illumination:²⁶ LORD, all your laws hang on your commandments of love. May your love be revealed in the reading of your word is read. Amen.

Read Deuteronomy 10:12-22

And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the LORD's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good? To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. Yet the LORD set his affection on your ancestors and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations—as it is today. Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer. For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt. Fear the LORD your God and serve him. Hold fast to him and take your oaths in his name. He is the one you praise; he is your God, who performed for you those great and awesome wonders you saw with your own eyes. Your ancestors who went down into Egypt were seventy in all, and now the LORD your God has made you as numerous as the stars in the sky.

Read Psalm 13

How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me? Look on me and answer, LORD my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death, and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall. But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the LORD's praise, for he has been good to me.

Read 1 John 3:1-2, 4:15-19

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us.

Closing Prayer: Lord, we wait in hope for you; you are our help and shield. In you we rejoice, because we trust in your holy name. May your unfailing love be with us, even as we put our hope in you. *Amen.*²⁷

²⁶ 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!

²⁷ from Psalm 33:20-22



Love

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.'

So if you've heard of Jesus, you probably know about one of his famous teachings called the Golden Rule. "Do to others what you would want them to do to you (Luke 6:31)." And this actually is a restatement of something else Jesus said, that the meaning of life is to love God and love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:31).

Now that's really beautiful, but what does he mean, exactly, by the word "love"? It's an unclear word in English because you can love your mom and you can love pizza. And if the word love means the same thing in both of those cases, your mom's going to feel real bad.

So what did Jesus mean in his language? Well, first of all, this "love your neighbor" phrase is a quotation from the Hebrew Scriptures, where the word for love is "*ahavah*." However, the language Jesus spoke and taught in from day-to-day, it was a cousin language of Hebrew, that is, Aramaic, in which the word for love is "*rakhmah*." But then, as Jesus' followers spread his teachings around the world, they translated them into Greek using the word "*agape*."

But here's what's fascinating: the earliest followers of Jesus, who wrote books of the New Testament in Greek, they didn't learn the meaning of *agape* by looking it up in ancient dictionaries. Rather, they looked to the teachings of Jesus and the story of his life to redefine their very concept of love.

So one time, Jesus was asked about the most important command in the Jewish Scriptures. And he first quoted from the ancient prayer in the Torah called the *Shema*. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart (Deuteronomy 6:5)." So love for God is the most important thing, but then Jesus quickly followed up, saying another command from the Torah was also the most important—to love your neighbor as yourself (Leviticus 19:18).

²⁸ from the BibleProject's Word Studies Advent Series: Love (bibleproject.com/explore/category/advent-series)

So which is the most important? Loving God or loving your neighbor? Jesus' answer is yes. To ask the question means you don't get his point. For Jesus, they're two sides of the same coin. Your love for God will be expressed by your love for people and vice versa. They're inseparable.

And so this makes it clear that, for Jesus, *agape* love is not primarily a feeling for someone else that happens to you, like our phrase "I fell in love." For Jesus, love is action. It's a choice that you make to seek the well-being of people other than yourself.

Jesus also went on to teach that genuine love for God and others means seeking people's well-being without expecting anything in return, especially from people who are in difficult situations who can't repay you even if they wanted to. According to Jesus, this kind of generous love reflects the very heartbeat of God.

And he took this even further. Jesus said that the ultimate standard of authentic love is how well you treat the person that you can't stand, or in his words, "You shall love your enemy and do good to them, expecting nothing in return (Luke 6:35)." For Jesus, this kind of enemy-embracing love imitates the very character of God himself.

Now, we wouldn't be talking about Jesus still today if he had only said things like love your enemy. This is how he actually lived. Jesus was constantly helping and serving the people around him in very practical and tangible ways. And he consistently moved towards poor and hurting people who couldn't benefit him in return. He showed love for the forgotten ones, the people who usually fall through the cracks.

And when Jesus eventually marched into Jerusalem, he made himself an enemy of the leaders of his people by accusing them of hypocrisy and corruption. But then, instead of attacking his enemies to overthrow them, he allowed them to kill him. Jesus died for the selfishness and corruption of his enemies because he loved them.

After Easter morning, Jesus, and then his followers, claimed that it was the power of God's love for the world that was revealed in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. As the apostle Paul put it, "God demonstrated his own *agape* for us in this, while we were still sinners, the Messiah died for us (Romans 5:8). Or in the words of the apostle John, "God's own *agape* was revealed when he sent his one and only Son into the world, so that through him, we could have life (1 John 4:9)." And for John then, this leads naturally to the conclusion, "Beloved ones, if that's how God loved us, then we ought to show love for one another (1 John 4:11)."

So Christian faith involves trusting that at the center of the universe is a being overflowing with love for his world, which means that the purpose of human existence is to receive this love that has come to us in Jesus and then to give it back out to others, creating an ecosystem of others-focused, self-giving love. And that's the New Testament meaning of *agape* love.

Pray: Lord, you are gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. May we love as you have loved us. Amen.

December 20

Sam Love

Read Luke 2:7-14 KJV

And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. 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.

When I was in the 4th grade at Mentor Elementary, we were on the first bus to arrive at the school. Sometimes our teacher, Mrs. hood, had not arrived yet. We were allowed to go to the classroom and get a head start on our work if we wanted to, or we could read or do anything except cause trouble.

The first thing we were required to do every day was write out multiplication tables from 1 x 1 through 12 x 12 and turn them in. We were expected to know these by heart. For those of you young of age – NO, there was not a calculator! Although mundane, this was a helpful exercise to commit the tables to memory.

At Christmastime for about ten days prior to Christmas break, we would be allowed to write out the Christmas story contained in the Scripture verses above. Of course, as a 4th grader, it helped pique the excitement of Christmas and suspended the less-than-exciting task of writing multiplication tables.

In school we opened our day with devotions and prayer. At Christmas we read the Christmas Scripture. These were things we were taught. By the time we reached the 7th grade there was a push from the not-so-wise to abolish prayer in school. I can remember our 7th grade teacher, Roland J. Brady, adamantly declaring he didn't care if they threw him in jail, he was going to continue – and continue he did with great defiance!

I think with sadness how Christianity is attacked from all sides. Our homes, our schools, and our society would be so much greater if the wisdom of Mrs. Hood and Mr. Brady were evident today. I implore you to do all you can to further the Christian principles, both at Christmas and throughout the year.

Pray: *Loving and Holy God of our salvation, you straighten the winding ways of our hearts and smooth the paths made rough by sin. Keep our conduct blameless, keep our hearts watchful in holiness, and bring to perfection the good you have begun in us. We ask this through him whose coming is certain, whose day draws near; your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.*²⁹

²⁹ from the Prayer for the Day 3, Second Sunday in Advent, [Book of Common Worship](#) (1993)

December 21

Sara Bass Wood

Read John 1:5

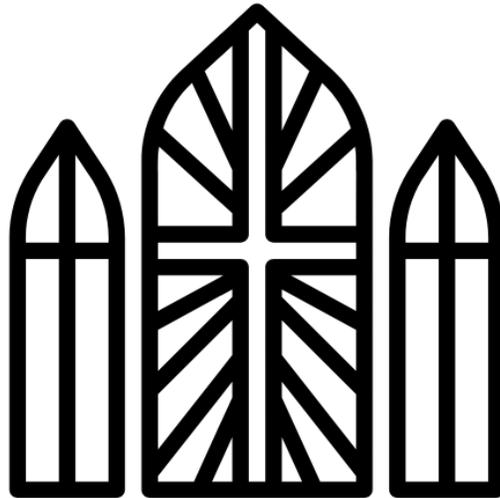
The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

The winter solstice is the shortest and darkest day of the year, occurring sometime between December 20 and 23rd, right in the middle of the season of light. Christmas can be an exciting time in a trying season. But when we set aside the stresses and celebrations, we see that at the heart of it all is a story of darkness in light. God had been silent for 400 years, and his people walking in spiritual darkness. They were living under Roman rule, and the nation of Israel was fractured, various groups vying for power and political control.

And then, in the midst of dismay, Jesus was born as the incarnate word of God. The birth of Christ overcame the darkness of the world in God's perfect timing.

So as we prepare during this season of Advent, let us do so knowing that whatever darkness we may experience, the light of Christ's birth is upon us.

Pray: *Almighty God, in love you have poured upon us the new light of your incarnate Word: Grant that this light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine hope and peace into our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.*³⁰



Blue Christmas: *The Longest Night*

December 21st marks the longest night of 2022, 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.

A Prayer for Blue Christmas: Almighty God, Comfort and heal all who suffer in body, mind, or spirit; give them courage and hope in their troubles, and bring to them the joy of your salvation. Amen.

³⁰ from the Collect for Christmas, *Book of Common Prayer* (1979)

December 22

from MUMC's 1988 Advent Devotional
Mable Love Brown (1936 - 2018)

Read John 3:16

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

My first memories of Christmas go back to the early 1940's during World War II – gas, sugar were rationed – rubber was scarce; it was all being used in the “war effort” – and all of the GOOD candy was being sent to the servicemen overseas (Hershey bars, Milky Ways, Butterfingers, Baby Ruths).

Daddy and Momma loaded us into our “a”-Model (Ford) for the rare and long-awaited trip to Grandma and Grandpa Skidmore's at Lenoir City, some 20 miles away if we crossed the ferry; some 40 miles away if we had to go around through Knoxville. No matter which way we went, the trip took FOREVER.

When we arrived at 507 W. First Avenue, we bounded up the 2 flights of steps from the street to the long narrow porch, making our way through the parallel row of racking chairs, to the waiting arms of Grandma Skidmore...Grandpa was usually right behind her, waiting his turn for HIS share of hugs and kisses...the window in the front door held a white rayon flag with a red border and was centered with 4 blue stars representing their 4 sons who were away in the Army: Uncle Fred, Uncle Troy, Uncle Glen, and Uncle Doc.

No doubt my grandparents' hearts were heavy with fear and anxiety for their sons away in service (2 of whom were in battle zones in Germany and Belgium) but they never allowed their worries to mar the joy of our Christmas reunion.

Grandpa always bought apples and oranges by the crate and stored them in the bedroom where we slept. I can still smell the delicious fruits/citrus aroma of that cold bedroom where we drifted off to sleep as children, oblivious to the concerns of the adults around us...our major interest being how Santa Claus would know where we were when he got ready to deliver presents. Ah, the blissful innocence of childhood!

Grandma always made dried-apple stack cakes and had the Owl Cookie Jar filled to the brim with teacakes, in spite of the rationing that was in effect all during those years. Grandpa always brought a huge 5 lb. Barber Pole stick of peppermint candy (hard as flint) and invariably broke it with the hammer and passed it around to us on a newspaper...it just wouldn't have tasted the same if we had eaten it any OTHER way...and this ritual was one I particularly favored. (Grandpa was a diabetic so HE had to forego the “fruits of his labors” but he always guaranteed OUR enjoyment of them.)

As the years went by these memories and traditions gave way to others but none more filled with LOVE or SACRIFICE...which are the very ESSENCE of the TRUE meaning of Christmas.

Pray: Dear Heavenly Father, as we remember Christmases Past and ponder the TRUE meaning of Christmas now, never let us forget the love and sacrifices of our parents, our grandparents, and of yours through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Gimme, Gimme, Gimme...

Read 1 Peter 4:8-11

Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

What is a gift? We all have received one. We all have given one. But do we attach more significance to receiving, or to giving? Unexpected gifts are a surprise and a treasure. There are birthday gifts, shower gifts, wedding gifts, charitable gifts, and "just because" gifts. The dictionary says a gift is "a thing given willingly to someone without payment."

Have you been told, "You give the BEST gifts"? Or, "You have the gift of gab"? A gift of talent, or the gift of comedy are wonderful "gifts," but who gives them? Who do we thank for those gifts? Our lives should be filled with thanks for the many gifts we receive daily. The gift of life, of our family, our friends, our next breath. God gives these gifts. We only need to pay attention.

Children have no problem letting you know if they want something, holding outstretched arms for toys, treats, hugs, or to be picked up and held. Do we ask the same of our heavenly Father? "Gimme, gimme, gimme..." — "I want, I need, I can't live without..." God knows what you need, just trust Him. Looking beyond ourselves and giving to others is a gift He gives us, the ability to think and discern others' needs by offering what we have, what He has given us.

Have you given a gift and never been thanked? Have you given a gift then been asked for more? Have you loaned money that apparently became a gift? All these have happened to me and to many of you, too. But the expectation of something in return is not a gift, it becomes a debt. God loves a cheerful giver, but sometimes we've been backed into that "joy" and how you deal with that becomes who you are—a giver, a forgiver, or a waiting "collector of a debt." You can choose which you want to be.

God gave us the best gift He had to offer, the Baby Jesus. This gift, along with His love and undeserving and unexpected grace, are what we as Christians celebrate this Advent and every year. Do not overlook this gift, and be thankful.

Pray: Thank you, Lord, for your perfect gift, your Son Jesus Christ. Help us to always be joyful givers throughout the year, to love one another, and be thankful that you loved us enough, in spite of ourselves, to redeem our souls of bitterness and shameful expectations. You are worthy of our love and praise...Amen.

The Love Family

Read Psalm 36:5-9

Your love, LORD, reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies. Your righteousness is like the highest mountains, your justice like the great deep. You, LORD, preserve both people and animals. How priceless is your unfailing love, O God! People take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house; you give them drink from your river of delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.

Read John 1:9

The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.

When I think of writing an advent devotional, I like to write about people of this church, past and present. This year I want to tell the story of not just one person, but a family, Sam Love and June Love Shaw's family. To start I have to go back to their Granddad Henry Love. Henry loved to sing. He along with my mother, Annabelle Cox, Burley Carpenter, and Dorothy Fern Hick (Carolyn Crisp's sister) formed a quartet (think Chuck Wagon Gang). Marian Cantley played the piano for them (think very young). They not only sang in this church, but were invited to many others. Henry had a few boys, and one of them was Sam and June's dad, Dale Love. Dale loved to sing. He was a tall man, and of course, always stood on the back row of the choir. But you knew if he was not in the choir. Sometimes Dale's wife, Mable, played the piano for the church services (think very lively). Dale and Mable had some children, and the only girl in the family was June (think very beautiful voice). June has sung many solos in cantatas and other choir productions. Now when I see the choir in place on Sunday mornings, I see Sam (and June).

Advent season is a time of light (think the coming of Christ). Celebrating this light brings joy, love, and most of all hope. The Love family helped Middlesettlements Church celebrate this season in the past, and I know this church and its families will be celebrating for many years to come no matter what the future brings.

Pray: Dear God, thank you for families that keep Christ's light shining in this world. Amen.



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.

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.³¹

Children's Christmas Punch

Maria Von Trapp

(yes, the real Maria Von Trapp)

1 quart grape juice
2 quarts water
2 cups sugar
½ tsp whole cloves
1 stick cinnamon
Rind & juice of 2 lemons
Rind & juice of 2 oranges

*Boil sugar, water, lemon rind,
and spices until flavored.*

*Mix with the rest of the
ingredients, boil 5 minutes, and
serve hot in punch glasses.*

*Here we come a-wassailing
Among the leaves so green;
Here we come a-wandering
So fair to be seen.*

*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!*

Christmastide Feasting & Festivities

1. Try singing the 12 Days of Christmas at least once!
2. 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).
3. 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.”
4. 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.
5. 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.
6. 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.
7. 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 “name day” 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!

³¹ Adapted from the Christmas Season Blessings found in *Blessings of the Table: Mealtime Prayers Throughout the Year* by Brother Victor-Antoine d’Avile-Latourrette.

December 25

Christmas Day

"For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people."

Titus 2:11

Prayer for Illumination:³² O Christ, the prophets foretold your coming, the poor longed to see you. The heavens celebrated your birth; the apostles, the martyrs, and the faithful down through the ages repeated the song of the angels. Your church praises you in every human language, for she has seen your salvation. Son of God, you humbled yourself and became a servant, raising us up to share in your glory. We were in darkness and you have given us light and strength, peace and joy. Lead us according to your loving will; make us a people who follow you in holiness. Give us generous hearts to hear your Word, and produce in us abundant fruit, through the power of your Spirit. Amen.³³

Read Psalm 96

Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth. Sing to the LORD, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples. For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the LORD made the heavens. Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and glory are in his sanctuary. Ascribe to the LORD, all you families of nations, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering and come into his courts. Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth. Say among the nations, "The LORD reigns." The world is firmly established, it cannot be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity. Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it. Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them; let all the trees of the forest sing for joy. Let all creation rejoice before the LORD, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his faithfulness.

Read Luke 2:1–20

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, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is

³² 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!

³³ Christmas Prayer for Illumination 2, [The Worship Sourcebook](#)

the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Closing Prayer: God Most High, your only Son embraced the weakness of flesh, to give us power to become your children; your eternal Word chose a dwelling among us, that we might live in your presence. Grant us a spirit of wisdom to know how rich is the glory you have made our own, and how great the hope to which we are called in Jesus Christ, your Word made flesh, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, in the splendor of eternal light, God forever and ever. *Amen.*³⁴

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 has included a *Twelve Days of Christmas* Activity page, with hymns and activities for each of the 12 days of Christmas. In addition to the *Twelve Days of Christmas* page, you’ll want to check out our Living Liturgically Christmastide and Epiphany pages for more ways to celebrate Jesus this season!

³⁴ *Prayer for the Day 2, Christmas Day, Book of Common Worship (1993)*



12 DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

December 25

1

Sing: Joy to the World!

Do: Celebrate Christmas at church and at home!

December 26

2

Sing: Good King Wenceslaus

Do: Read Acts 6 & 7; Pray or donate to the LCAC

December 27

3

Sing: What Child Is This

Do: Rest and enjoy Christmastide!

December 28

4

Sing: O Little Town of Bethlehem

Do: Read Matthew 2:13-20; Pray for children, babies, and those you've feared

December 29

5

Sing: Hark! the Herald Angels Sing

Do: Bake a birthday cake for Jesus!

December 30

6

Sing: Angels We Have Heard on High!

Do: Give thanks for all of the blessings you've experienced in 2022

December 31

7

Sing: Angels, from the Realms of Glory

Read 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Celebrate New Years & New Creation!

January 1

8

Sing: O Come, All Ye Faithful

Do: Read Luke 2:21-40; Give thanks for the name of Jesus, which tells of God's salvation!

January 2

9

Sing: God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen

Do: Pray for the good health of our family, church, & neighbors

January 3

10

Sing: It Came Upon the Midnight Clear

Do: Rest and enjoy Christmastide!

January 4

11

Sing: Go, Tell It on the Mountain

Do: Pray for missionaries and all who do not yet know Jesus

January 5

12

Sing: The First Noel

Do: Have a 12th Night Party - celebrate the gift of Jesus!



Living Liturgically

Epiphany

The following statement was taken from an old Middlesettlements Methodist-Episcopal Church Sunday School book from 1904:

December 4, 1904

Today it is wet and rainy. We had no Sunday school. But I trust next Sabbath will be a fine day.

This quarter will soon be out and we will start a new year. I hope everybody will start the New Year with new resolutions and turn over a new page in the history of their lives. I think every body should set out on the New Year with a new spirit, new resolutions, fresh courage, and make the best of it while they live, for life is short and death is certain.

Hoping everybody will start out on the New Year, I still remain and wish everyone a Happy New Year.

I am your faithful secretary,
Effie M. Milligan

Meal Blessing for Epiphany

Mighty God, you made manifest the mystery of your Word made flesh with the witness of a blazing star. And seeing it, the Magi came from afar and offered you gifts. Grant that the star of your holiness may shine forever within our hearts, and that we may find our treasure in offering you our praise and thanksgiving. Amen.³⁵

An Epiphany House Blessing

Visit, O blessed Lord, this home with the gladness of your presence. Bless all who live here with the gift of your love; and grant that they may manifest your love [to each other and] to all whose lives they touch. May they grow in grace and in the knowledge and love of you; guide, comfort, and strengthen them; and preserve them in peace, O Jesus Christ, now and for ever. Amen.

Epiphany Feasting & Festivities

1. January 5th is also known as “Twelfth Night”: the final day of the twelve days of Christmas celebration. Alternating traditions have it as a good day to throw a party or a good day to take down decorations. If you throw a party, traditional 12th Night fare includes the King’s Cake, which somehow got drafted into New Orleans’s Mardi Gras celebrations but originated here. If you want to go all out baking your own King’s Cake, hide a dried bean in the cake: whoever finds it is “King” (or Queen) for the night.
2. January 6th marks Epiphany, the day when the Wise Men finally make it to Jesus and the Christmas season draws to a close. If you’ve kept a nativity out, now’s the time to add the Wise Men. If they’ve been wandering through the house, find something star-shaped and have them “follow” the star to the manger (kiddos love leading the star, although it might feel more like a 40-years-in-the-wilderness kind of journey).
3. The way to end Epiphany is to bless your house. You can invite Pastor Magan over (she’d love it!) or you can try this traditional blessing yourself. With chalk, write the initials of the 3 Wise Men above the main door of the house, together with the year and a cross: “20 K + M + B 22” (Scripture doesn’t have the names for the Wise Men, but tradition holds that the names are Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar). The crosses stand for Christ, and the letters have a double meaning: in addition to the Wise Men’s names, they’re also an abbreviation of an ancient blessing that means “May Christ bless this house.” Along with the chalk marks, take time to invite God’s presence and blessings into your home.

³⁵ Adapted from the Christmas Season Blessings found in *Blessings of the Table: Mealtime Prayers Throughout the Year* by Brother Victor-Antoine d’Avilea-Latourrette.