

d
e
advent
o
t
i
o
n
a
l

2020



INTRODUCTION

“No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar, but on the lampstand so that those who enter may see the light.”

Luke 11:33

We are entering the ninth month of “Coronatide” – a season not of the Church but of the world. It is in the ninth month that full-term births of new life occur. The waiting can be both excruciating and joy-filled. Our congregation, like many other families of faith, has been apart more than together in the physical sense. Members of our clergy have led the way in keeping us together in spirit, and it is through the Holy Spirit that this 2020 Advent Devotional arises from hearts longing for connection.

Participants in our 2020 “Writers Guild” bring you words of light in the darkness that grows before yielding to the Light of the world. Prepare your lampstands as you read, reflect, and share the hope we have as followers of Jesus the Messiah.

To those who have pored over the messages we will receive each day, we thank you. The graciousness with which each writer shares part of his/her history is priceless. Let all who enter this space see the light.

~Tracy Brinkley~

Advent: Hope, Faith, Joy, Love, and Peace

This summer I had the pleasure of leading the fourth and fifth grade children in the C.S. Lewis book series *The Chronicles of Narnia*, of which the most popular book is *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. The seven books contain some of Lewis' best theology, and I enjoyed unpacking a few of the golden nuggets hidden within their pages with the children. If you are unfamiliar with the stories, they're about children who discover a land of talking animals, mythical creatures, and dancing trees. There they meet Aslan, the Great Lion, the son of the Emperor beyond the Sea. They are stories of creation, fall, sin, redemption, salvation, and sanctification. They are stories of hope, faith, joy, love, and peace.

In one of the lesser-known books, *The Last Battle*, children Eustace and Jill, King Tirian, and his trusty steed Jewel (who happens to be a unicorn) realize they are fighting a battle they cannot win on their own. They pray to Aslan for strength and courage to face the end as they try to save their friend, a gentle donkey. They know that when they enter the stable it will likely mean their death, but when they get inside, they find something unexpected. Their four cousins who discovered Narnia first are there along with Aslan and so much more! When they question how a place so large and beautiful could be inside such a small space, Lucy responds, "In our world too, a stable once had something inside it that was bigger than our whole world."

During Advent we are reminded of the greatest story ever told. A story of how love came down and was born a child and slept in a feed trough inside a stable. It's the love story of God, of how God became incarnate as a child, grew into a man, worked with his hands, walked among us, taught us how to live, and then chose to give us the ultimate gift of love on the cross to redeem us from our sins. It is a story of hope, faith, joy, love, and peace.

Many times when we receive gifts, we hear a couple of phrases — "Good things come in small packages," and "The best gifts are gifts from the heart." Through Jesus, God has given us the greatest gift of love.

In Ephesians 3:17-19, we read:

Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.

While our hearts are a small muscle that help keep our bodies functioning, the hearts of our souls are boundless. Our hearts are very much like the stable—something small that has the capacity to hold a love that knows no measure. It is this love that fuels our hope, our faith, and our joy, and which ultimately gives us peace. When we are filled with the love of God, we become “gifts of the heart” to others, sharing that love by taking care of the sick and poor, the widow and orphan, and the imprisoned. We offer hope by being a light in the darkness. We grow in faith and share it with others. And we can be a balm of peace to a broken and hurting world.

Yes, Lucy, a stable once had something inside it that was bigger than our whole world. It was a gift from our Lord. The gift that keeps on giving and never ends, because God's love is unfailing.

Merry Christmas.
Lynda Hepler



Tradition.

In our rapidly changing world, it can sometimes be difficult to pass down family customs and beliefs from one generation to the next – much less to three or four. We have been fortunate to enjoy a Christmas tradition that spans at least five generations or more and covers well over a century.

Shelton's grandmother "Tih" grew up making mints as a child in Atlantic, NC, our state's own version of "Down East." Tih taught Shelton's parents how to do it, and they taught Shelton. Stan knew he had been given acceptance and approval when he was invited to cut the mints fairly early in the dating days. The tradition was handed down to Brian and Anne, who shared it with their spouses, Cynthia and Matt. The four grandchildren – Lucy, Clay, Abigail, and Benjamin – are currently serving apprenticeships, which consist of cutting (and eating the ugliest) mints.

Mint-making is more art than science, although we have come to appreciate the invention of a digital candy thermometer. The recipe is simple: boil a mixture of water, butter, and sugar for a while; take it off the stove at just the right time and temperature; pour it on a marble slab to let it cool; pull the taffy-like mess until it can be shaped into long cords ready to cut; cut; let it cream; pack (or eat); and give it away.

That last part is the real secret ingredient.

For many years, our family delivered tins of mints to friends and family on Christmas Eve under the cover of darkness, the children leaving the tin in the appointed place for each house and racing back to jump in the car, undetected by the recipients.

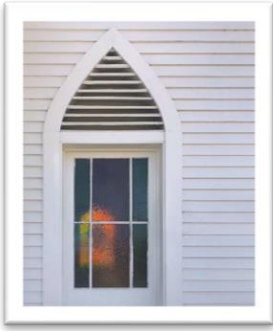
Time and circumstance have slowed production down a bit lately, but we still crank out several batches each year and gather for mint-making with our extended family.

We learned long ago that "pulling mints" builds family and friendships ... and it's fun!

It is a tradition that has stood the test of time and, we hope, will continue to be shared in the true spirit of the season.

Wishing you a Merry Christmas,
Stan and Shelton Styers





When I was young, I was never made to go to church. I wanted to go. At the time, my parents didn't go to church, so I went with my grandparents.

I remember getting ready. I would trail my grandmother, admiring the lipstick she wore. She would eventually open the off-limits cedar chest. She would let me choose a pair of gloves and a fancy purse. The cedar smell made me

think of beautiful clothes and elegant parties.

Once I had my purse, it was off to my grandfather to get something to fill it. He would be watching a gospel program on TV, but he would always get up to get me Juicy Fruit, a notepad, and a pencil.

I'd use them all during the 11:00 service. Stuffing multiple pieces of gum in my mouth while I drew pictures of Jesus, a fair number of them showing him on the cross, but always with a holy light around him.

If I got bored with drawing and it was summer, I'd look out the open windows and marvel at the sight of stained-glass windows next to grass and trees. Other times, I'd stare at the baptismal pool and the painting behind it. I would wonder how far down the river God lived.

Even with that thought, I knew Jesus was close to me. It never occurred to me to question that fact. He was as real to me as Juicy Fruit gum, my drawings, and the hymns we sang at the end of the service. I will always be indebted to my grandparents that Jesus is always beside me.

Chris Eddinger

December 2, 2020

2020 Has been a year that we all will remember. It has been a year filled with a pandemic, political and social divides, and many people wondering what the future holds. During these times, we often look in many alternative directions in hopes of achieving our desired outcomes and lose the center focus that we are not in control. This Christmas is going to be special for our family getting to celebrate with our children, but we have to remember the greatest gift was born and we are celebrating Him.

I hope this Christmas we all reflect on the real reason of Christmas. Our girls have asked if we can celebrate by making a birthday cake and singing happy birthday to Jesus. This moved us as parents due to the fact they understand it is not just gifts, bows, and celebration. We hope to raise girls who are good stewards and to enjoy watching their relationship with God grow.



John 3:17. Jesus explaining to Nicodemus,
“God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him.”

God is love,
David and Erin Shew

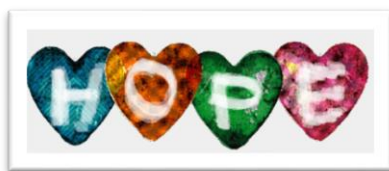
To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven. – Ecclesiastes 3:1

What a time to be alive...or so it seems. As I've navigated this year and the hurdles presented during these days, it feels like every turn has the potential for disaster. I've found my life, and the many positives it contains, being washed over by the feelings of fear, worry, division, anger, frustration, loneliness, and severance. Like bad characters in a haunted house, these feelings have been waiting to jump out around the corner and “get me” just when I let my guard down. So many things I count on for a sense of routine, peace, and rejuvenation were cancelled this year: a week of ASP, Youth Retreats, the Contemporary Worship

Service, Thanksgiving Breakfast, and the Love Feast, just to name a few. On some level, the fear of being ambushed has replaced the hopefulness, optimism, joy, and perspective that I used to enjoy; and I am sure I'm not alone. As you read this you are most certainly being met with challenges that squarely place the weight of the world on your shoulders... sometimes it all seems too much to carry. Thankfully, I haven't dealt with severe illness or death; I've not been unemployed or had to worry about paying my bills; I have food to eat and plenty of people to help support me if I don't. And in this thought lies the rub and some perspective. In Acts, we read of Jesus taking the scales from Saul's eyes so he could see again—sight restored so that the love and grace of Christ could be shared with the world through the actions of Paul.

I'm left with the feeling that during this season we are facing our own conversion moments. As the season of Advent comes upon us, individually and collectively, we are being called to trust that Jesus will meet us, protect us, and transform us. Removing the scales from our eyes so we may see; and the ugliness from our hearts so we can once again love our brothers and sisters, our neighbors and strangers, even our enemies with the fullest of God's love that we can muster. Think back for a moment, your mind focused solely on a sanctuary full of individual lights becoming one brilliant display of fellowship and love. The sounds of "Silent Night" spilling out onto Randolph St., and the smiles of your neighbor as you prepare for a short walk into the cold night. For just a moment it all comes back to you. A seemingly small reminder of all the hope, and peace, and community, and love you feel in that moment. That's where God is in all of this... in the light. Always there, and always conquering the darkness of this world and transforming the shadows inside of our hearts. As we transition into this next season, may you find your purpose re-kindled and your hearts encouraged and hopeful. The light is here... don't be afraid.

Grace, Peace, and Merry Christmas,
Chris McCullough



December 3, 2020

Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus

God's timetable is not my timetable. When God tells me to wait, I don't understand. Then Advent comes along, and I'm reminded what waiting is and how to wait. In Genesis 22:18, we find that through Abraham's offspring "all nations on earth will be blessed." I believe that Jesus is the fulfillment of this promise. But how long did it take God to fulfill his promise?



In sincere prayer I often ask for this and I ask for that. Then, like rubbing a magic lamp, I expect God to do what I've asked right now or this week perhaps. Advent reminds me that God's time is not our time, and God's timing is right. In Numbers 24:17, "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel." Next, in Isaiah 11:1, we are still waiting. He is from the line of Jesse, the father of King David: "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a branch will bear fruit. The spirit of the Lord will rest on him."

Jeremiah 23:5-6 tells me He is from the line of King David: "The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land This is the name by which he will be called: the Lord our righteous savior." But we must wait; the time is not right. From the prophet Isaiah (Is. 7:14) we know that He was born from a virgin when the time is right: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and you will call him Immanuel." The name Immanuel means "God with us" and indicates the divinity of Jesus.

From the first announcement in Genesis to the birth of Jesus was maybe 4000 years. Now that is the definition of "Long Expected." True to His word, God kept his promise.

Father, I need the spiritual gift of patience most of all this year, and I need it now.

Roger Bryant

There are few things in this world that I love more than Christmas lights. There is just something magical about them. Colored lights, white lights, small bulbs, large bulbs, indoor on a tree, outdoor on a front porch, I adore them all. My love of Christmas lights stretches back as far as I can remember. I have very distinct memories of sitting in my father's lap as a young girl, mesmerized by the family Christmas tree. I would sit with him and watch the lights blink in their unique pattern, and it quickly became a game for me. Which strand will blink next? Will this strand ever blink? I could spend my entire evening staring at the tree. Even now, many of my December evenings are spent riding around different neighborhoods in the area to look at the lights. I love to see the trees through people's windows and the decorations in their yards. It brings me such JOY.

While the commercial lights of the Christmas season bring out the little kid in me each year, they are not my favorite set of December lights. It is the sanctuary filled with candlelight that stops me in my tracks. Each member of the church holding a candle, singing "Silent Night." It is the most beautiful part of my Christmas every single year. It is my most favorite tradition. It always has been.

Growing up in Greensboro, my family attended a small church. At our Christmas Eve service, we would exit the pews and form a large circle around the edge of the sanctuary to light our candles and sing. When my family moved to Augusta, we attended a much larger church where forming a circle within the sanctuary was impossible. We remained in our pews for the passing of light. While this was a change from the tradition I was used to, it was no less beautiful. In fact, the thousands of candles in that large sanctuary took my breath away. This was it for me: the standard of what a Christmas Eve should be. How could there be anything more beautiful than this view? Five or six years later, I joined the church orchestra. The orchestra played at the Christmas Eve service, which brought another change to my favorite tradition. I would no longer be shoulder to shoulder with my family, surrounded by my favorite lights of Christmas. Instead, I would be on stage looking out over the sea of lights. As I watched the light being passed from one candle to the next across the dark sanctuary, I welcomed the change of tradition. I was grateful for the new and unique view of this familiar service.

The next change in my beloved tradition came when I spent my first Christmas at Memorial. I asked Justin what to expect from the services throughout the Advent Season. I was eagerly awaiting his description of the Christmas Eve service, but I was disappointed. Christmas Eve was supposed to be a large production: nearly a hundred people in the choir loft singing “Joy to the World” and “O Come, All Ye Faithful” with an orchestra of strings and horns accompanying the mighty chorus. Justin did his best to assure me that I would love the Love Feast service for those very reasons. I had never heard of a Love Feast service, but he promised there would be beautiful music and my beloved candlelight. I was skeptical, but not let down. In fact, Memorial has set the new standard for me. You all added to my favorite tradition in the most special way. I had never been to a service where the light was carried out into the world. My favorite light in the entire world had always been contained to the sanctuary. It was always cherished and admired by the church and then extinguished within the church walls. Walking my candle out to the front lawn became the new standard of Christmas for me. Is there anything more important than sharing the light with others?

A change in tradition is tough. For many, it is heartbreaking. However, with each change to my favorite Christmas tradition, I found more beauty. I found God in each change. This 2020 Christmas may bring change to many traditions. Look for the beauty. When you find it, share it with the world.

Allison Finch



Christmas Meaning in a Mexican Tradition

Several years ago, I was working in Mexico for VF Corp., when I decided to stay over the weekend in Chihuahua. I did not realize it at the time, but I had been invited to a 400-year-old traditional celebration called “Las Posadas” (“Inns” or “Shelters”). Las Posadas recreates Mary and Joseph’s search for a place to stay where she can give birth. This is a nine-day celebration beginning December 16 and ending December 24.



There was a large gathering of people—children and adults—assembled at one house. We all were given a sheet of paper with song lyrics and a candle. The children were dressed in beautiful costumes, portraying the familiar characters in the story: Mary, Joseph, shepherds, angels.

We started our journey, children leading the way. It was a dark night and the candlelight shone brightly. A small child dressed as an angel led us. We stopped at several selected homes. At each of them the “innkeeper” came out and talked to “Joseph.” The dialogue was sung by all of the people at each home.

Pilgrims: Pray give us lodging, dear sir, in the name of Heav’n.
All day since morning to travel we’ve given.
Mary, my wife, is expecting a child.
She must have shelter tonight. Let us in, let us in!

Innkeeper: You cannot stop here, I won’t make my house an inn.
I do not trust you, your story is thin.
You two might rob me and then run away.
Find somewhere else you can stay. Go away, go away.

Similar interactions occurred at several other homes until we reached the final stop.

Innkeeper: Joseph, dear Joseph, how could I be so blind?
Not to know you and the virgin so fine!
Enter, blest pilgrims, my house is your own.
Praised be to God on His throne! Please come in,
please come in!

Christmas 2020 ends a very hard year for us all. It is so important to capture the celebration of the young Savior's birth. A birth that ushered in a New World—a Risen World where innkeeper makes room for the couple in need. Let us string up the piñata and experience the joy on the faces of the children.

Harold Vannoy

Blessed by the presence of both sets of grandparents in my earlier years, I possess many cherished Christmas memories. One such Christmas “grand-gift” brought to life for me the wisdom of, “Love is often shown best in deeds rather than words.”

Sweet Mamaw Stevenson always began planning and preparing her traditional Christmas Eve special treat weeks in advance. Her creativity knew no bounds, and anticipation of “this year’s special Mamaw touch” ran high.

I had been dating Brian for a bit; yet, not everyone in our family had met him. How I wished he could have been with us! Alas, the Marine Corps had other Christmas Eve plans for him.

But Mamaw also had a plan ...

The wire strung the full length of the dining and family rooms heightened our anticipation, as did the twinkle in Mamaw’s eye. With humble grandeur Mamaw proceeded to attach the first homemade hot air balloon and send it soaring across the room. Inside the basket were handmade dolls with uncanny resemblance to the members of my uncle’s family!

Family balloons soared as everyone laughed and checked out their dolls. My brother and I waited patiently (as best we could) for our family balloon ... and then ... there it was ... soaring toward us.

Curiously, there were five heads peeking over the basket rim ... Mom, Dad, my brother, me, and a US Marine in dress blues, sporting a high-and-tight made from tiny brown threads upon his head!



It was at that moment that I knew Brian was unconditionally accepted as part of our family. Mamaw's inclusion of this man with whom I had fallen in love meant the world to me!

Mamaw could have simply told me she liked Brian, but the time, labor, and love she put into that doll in that hot air balloon basket touched my heart more deeply than words.

"Love is often shown best in deeds rather than words."

I hope to always remember that Christmas Eve and Mamaw's gift of love soaring from her heart to mine.

Linda Fitzgerald

Make It Simple

It's the most wonderful time of the year! Why? Because we are focused on celebrating the birth of Christ and sharing his love with others. Many people decorate their homes for others to enjoy. We spend more time baking goodies to share with our friends, neighbors, co-workers, shut-ins, etc. We send Christmas cards to those we are thinking about, and of course we buy gifts to share with others. People seem so much happier during the Christmas season; I even catch myself humming to the Christmas songs playing in the stores. Why? Because during the Christmas season, we are doing exactly what God wants us to do all year long. We are focused on the birth of Jesus Christ and sharing God's love with everyone we can instead of focusing on ourselves. As much as I love this time of year and the happiness it brings to my heart, it only makes sense that I would challenge myself to focus on doing things for other people and making others happy all throughout the year as God wants us to. It doesn't have to be anything extravagant to put smiles on other people's faces. It can be as simple as sending a shut-in a "thinking of you" card.

Ken and I learned a long time ago how just the simplest things can bring the most joy. Our daughter was two years old, and we were so excited about the gift she was going to get for Christmas. She was getting a kitchen set with all the accessories. We couldn't wait to see her expression on Christmas morning! It was Christmas Eve and Ken's brother had come by our house. He was getting ready to leave and he asked our daughter what she was hoping to get for Christmas. She started jumping up and down and said, "a sucker!" We just looked at each other and both felt sick to our stomachs. We didn't have a sucker anywhere in our house. Thank goodness Ken's brother had a sucker in his car! Christmas morning, Erin looked in her stocking first thing and pulled out that sucker. She was sooooo excited!! She could not have cared less about the kitchen set. She wanted us to unwrap that sucker for her. Both of us remember today, as if it just happened yesterday, what she did. She licked that sucker and then came up to us and said, "Mommy lick, Daddy lick GOOD." This two-year-old taught us that

the simplest things can bring the most joy. She also taught us that God made us, from birth, to share what we have, no matter how simple, with others and that is what will bring us the most happiness!

Merry Christmas, and we hope everyone will feel the Christmas spirit throughout all of 2021!

Ken and Charlotte Hanner





HEALING
COMES IN THE
WAITING. HEALING
COMES IN THE GAPS OF
THE BRANCHES WHERE WE
LIFT ONE ANOTHER UP IN ARDENT
PRAYERS FOR PEACE AND RESTORATION.
HEALING COMES IN THE STRINGING OF LIGHTS
TO DISPEL THE DARKNESS. HEALING COMES AS OUR
EYES ADJUST TO ILLUMINATED TRUTHS THAT WE HAVE
HIDDEN BEHIND CLOSED LIDS. HEALING COMES IN REALIZING
THAT YOU BELONG TO ME AND I BELONG TO YOU. HEALING COMES
IN THE PARTICULAR WAY OF JESUS, OF BELIEVING THAT JESUS IS THE HOPE
OF THE WORLD. HEALING COMES AS WE AWAIT THE SOUND OF THE CRY IN THE
NIGHT, THE PRECURSOR TO THE CRY WE WILL ONE DAY HEAR IN THE MIDDLE OF A
FRIDAY WE CALL GOOD. HEALING COMES IN THE ADORATION OF BOTH BABE AND OF
RESURRECTED LORD. HEALING COMES IN THE CAROLS WE SING INTO THE NIGHT. SO
NOW, TOGETHER,
WE WAIT. A HOLY
MOMENT AT A TIME.

Tracy Brinkley

Advent 2020

I am sure one of my favorite Christmas memories did not start off as a favorite memory for my grandparents. As in most households, decorating the Christmas tree turned into a stressful time for my grandparents. Our family always visited these grandparents on Christmas Eve after we attended a Moravian Love Feast service.

I vividly remember this one Christmas Eve when we arrived at my grandparents' house. Pam and I went into the living room to see the tree with all of the presents under it. To our surprise, the living room was treeless. We were both confused and upset not to see a decorated tree with presents under it. My grandfather explained to the family that the decorating of the tree had led to harsh words and hurt feelings, which caused him to refuse to continue. Instead, he had dragged the tree to the back of the house and returned to the living room, where he took a string of lights and wrapped them around an ottoman.

Sure enough, when we went back to the living room, there was an ottoman with Christmas lights wrapped around it. My family brought our presents in and arranged them around the stool and the Christmas festivities continued as normal.

To this day, any time the Christmas season causes stressful times for my family, I always threaten to remove the tree and decorate the ottoman. I can promise that neither Pam nor I will ever forget this unique Christmas Eve. A nicely decorated tree is definitely not the most important part of Christmas!

Mike Lanning

My Granddaddy was a constant in my life. My earliest memories include him. We affectionately called him “Cranberry Granddaddy.” He was a private man and a Marine. He was a man of few words, but he often spoke of the importance of church and gave my two boys small green Bibles when they were born. He always smelled like cloves and loved maple candies. He was a man who always showed up for those he loved. He was a tough dad but a gentle, loving grandfather. My older sister and I joke that he would still give us big, wet kisses on the lips even when we were adults!

Christmas was always a special time at Granddaddy’s house. He loved having his family visit more than anything, and we would help him decorate before our Christmas Eve get-together. He had a real Christmas tree with the big vintage bulbs that glowed so brightly. He was very particular with how the tree should be decorated and would sit back and direct us where we had missed a spot or where a bulb needed to be moved. The things that drive you crazy when you’re a kid and the things that make you smile when you grow up. We fried corn fritters and he had to have applesauce with them.

My Granddaddy always showed up. He would pick me up from school when I was small in his big Bronco truck, and we would go to his workshop where he worked as the maintenance director for over 30 years at his church. I was amazed at the number of keys he had! He would stop by most days just to check in. He could fix anything and would. He always answered the phone and he always said, “Yello!” He never forgot to say, “I love you,” before hanging up.

My Cranberry Granddaddy went to be with Jesus in October. I got the amazing opportunity to visit with him in Hospice and let him know exactly what he meant to me. At his funeral, I learned that he was this constant for so many people.



He was the real deal. My brother is this kind of man, and I am thankful every day for both of them.

This Christmas I will celebrate the birth of our precious Savior with my family. I'll make corn fritters and serve them with applesauce. I'll light a clove candle and I'll cry and smile. And I will celebrate the life of my precious Granddaddy whom I know I will see again.

Mallory Smith

December 11, 2020

Some beautiful words of Jesus: “I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” John 16:12.

ADVENT: I have said/written many things about this over 41 years! You know, those 4 weeks before Christmas. I have made much about that season. Some apocalyptic, say, from Ezekiel, even Isaiah. Then, apocryphal, and not to forget, pseudepigraphal. Of course, some notes of the prophetic. And then, simply literal remarks from those Scriptures in Matthew and Luke. To be honest, I have said and written some pronouncements about Advent that will not stand up in any court, just to get through the season, and on with Christmas! Those personal commentaries would be in none of the above categories, but simply, “Say something, Kyles; it’s Sunday!” I regret those occasions of necessity!

But of late, with much prayer as I have touched the Holy Book, there is a single word that holds deep and deeper value-meaning through these few retired years: “Anticipation.” That word is of no surprise to many of you who have tended to the meanings of Advent over the years. It is a good word. Goes like this.

Something is coming, maybe someone. You don’t know what it is, but at a higher level, you feel it. A horizon in the East is lifting up to our vision. And yet, you have to wait until whatever it is becomes manifest. “Looking forward to something, even with eagerness, a condition of expectancy,” says our brother, Roget.

Biblical stories are resplendent with anticipation. Advent leads us by the hand and heart to those Scriptures where folk are hearing messengers in sheepfields in the middle of the night! Babies are leaping in women’s wombs! Men, about where they usually are, look and sound dumbfounded, frightened, and try to think their way through practical methods to rid themselves of this, like putting away the perpetrators, like Elizabeth and Mary. Soliloquies abound: again, Mary, Elizabeth, Joseph, and more. One of the characters is struck speechless! Magi see stars. A king is scared, jealous, plotting, and a liar. One even admits, albeit later, that there is something coming, that God-Man, “whose shoelaces I am not fit to bend down and loose.” You see? You hear it? Anticipation is boiling over here!!

John 16:12 has Jesus point-of-fact saying: “Listen; some things I simply cannot tell you; the burden (good translation!) of what I have to say, you cannot take it now.” Wow! I was not expecting that. We are left exposed, as it were; not in control, like those Biblical characters, but now, in 2020..... who look, watch, listen, and most of all, hush! Something approaches, close by, but not yet. Anticipation: that expression of life when human breath quickens, blood pressure rises, heartbeats ratchet up, eyes bug, ears can hear the proverbial pin drop! Advent.

Perhaps this will help us.

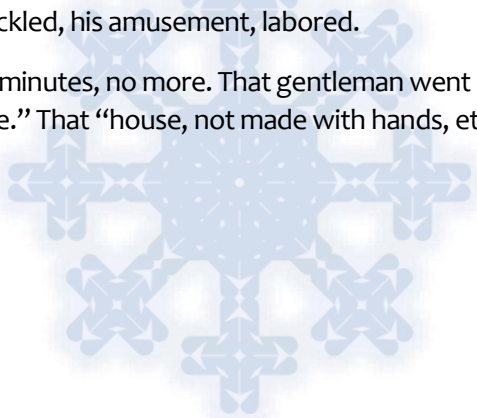
I volunteer at Hospice. One night, couple of years back, as my role is clear, I check rooms for temperature, doorlocks, lights ... not so much with patients; just the mechanics of the buildings and clerical reports.

I entered a gentleman's room with my role in hand, on tiptoe, as not to disturb the silence. His eyes opened. Me: “How you doing, Brother?” He: “Cold in here,” in a nearly inaudible volume, struggling to be heard. He could not move, barely talk. I retrieved a blanket from the closet and tucked him clear up to his chin. He: “That's good.” He continued with much labor: “I think I am alright. Just laying here, waiting to go to the house, and see if there is anything to all this Jesus talk.” Anticipation was thick in that room! Expectancy that causes mere humans to catch their breath. Even eagerness in his voice. Something is coming. “People” were present, but not there, as you probably know what I mean. Not ghosts, haints, or saints, spooks but presence of more than us two! Me: “Maybe, when you get to the house, tell ‘em I said, ‘Hey.’” We both chuckled, his amusement, labored.

I went on about my chores. 30 minutes, no more. That gentleman went on, in his own words, “to the house.” That “house, not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”

What happened? Advent.

Kyles Wallace



My favorite Christmas decorations are nativity scenes. Yes, I love Christmas trees, wreaths, and sparkling lights, but there is something special about nativity scenes. The word *nativity* is taken from the Latin word *nativus* which means “arisen by birth.” Saint Francis of Assisi created the very first nativity scene in a cave in Greece in 1223. Saint Francis’ idea caught on, and now it is almost impossible to go through the Christmas season without seeing a nativity scene. They come in many different forms, such as living scenes, tabletop sets, ornaments, and other various types of art.

Over the years, I have enjoyed having several different nativity sets from my childhood home to my home with Chad and Kelly. Perhaps my favorite is Kelly’s “Little People Toy Nativity Set.” I remember her being so excited when I gave it to her. She would rearrange and interact with all of the pieces as she played with it and told the story of Jesus’ birth. Maybe as adults we should be more like a child when we set up our nativity sets. This year let’s not rush through setting up the individual pieces, but rather think about Jesus’ humble birth, His ultimate sacrifice, and His gift of everlasting life to all who believe.

Merry Christmas!
Lynn Carrick



December 13, 2020

“Waiting... and Waiting....”

We spend a LOT of time in life being told to wait.

“Please wait to be seated.”

“Please wait while the updates are completed.”

“Please wait here for the next available cashier.”

The dreaded “Please wait for the next available customer service representative. Current wait time is 45 minutes.”

And, in our Covid19 world, “Please wait here to maintain proper social distancing.”

That time spent waiting for whatever we’re waiting for can be overwhelming with its wide variety of thoughts and imaginings, fears and reservations, joys and concerns, and emotions and reactions.

The 9-year old is wide-eyed with excitement, anticipating the possibility of what might be under the Christmas tree from Santa.

The nervous student, waiting with pen in hand and a mind full of knowledge and hastily-memorized dates and facts, has slight heart palpitations when finally hearing, “You may now open the test booklet and begin.”

The expectant mother and father of a baby on the way are both surely a frenzied mix of excited, scared, and hopeful. (Imagine what Mary and Joseph were thinking at this point in their pregnancy!)

The average Jane or Joe, waiting for a tow truck on the side of the road when the car breaks down on the way to work, races through a series of feelings of anxiety, anger, regret (“I should’ve paid better attention to that CHECK ENGINE light.”)

All of us, in December 2020, waiting for a vaccine and eradication of Covid19, are hopeful in our expectations that life will return to “normal” soon.

The Advent Season is our time, as a global church and local family, to WAIT. We’re waiting for the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ,

our Savior. This year is a good bit different than we could've imagined last year at this time.

Our celebrations of Christmas will be very different this year because of Covid19. We won't all be able to "go home" and celebrate Christmas with our loved ones the same way we did in years past.

In the throes of political division, necessary physical and social distancing, and realignment of everyday life, let's not forget the joy, hope, and love that this time of year affords us while we WAIT FOR IT.

Norris Norwood



December 14, 2020

Holidays in our home bring so many wonderful memories. There were the hours spent in the kitchen with Mom making cookies and other treats. Well, my two brothers and I pretty much just showed up to plop down the cookie cutters and put the sprinkles on the cookies before fighting over which kid would get to lick the bowl and which two would get the beaters. No matter which kid got what, each of us believed that the one we were given was the best of the batch.

I remember a rare snowy Christmas morning when we were very young. Dad took us outside and, one by one, lifted us high above his head to look at the roof to see if we could see Santa's reindeer tracks. When no one could see them, Dad simply explained that the snow must have covered them up.

A big event for our family was the church's annual Christmas Cantata, especially with Mom singing in the choir. I remember playing hide and seek under the pews with my brothers, learning the music by heart. But now, I wonder how in the world my Mom focused on the music and the choir director as she watched the heads of her children randomly pop up and then disappear in between the pews.

There was the Thomasville Christmas parade, when we were bundled up and allowed to sit on the curb. Seeing candy thrown from a float, we would jump up and run to grab a piece or two only seconds before another kid did so. Later that evening, Dad would come home from work carrying 3 inflatable plastic Rudolph or Santa toys, given to him by the vendor who used the parking lot at Mann Drugs for the parade, knowing that Dad had 3 small kids.

To this day, every year while decorating the Christmas tree, my most favorite ornaments are hung first, and they are those that were given to me by my parents. One ornament each year for as long as I can remember. They include a couple of mangers and several years of angels (that somehow stopped when I got into junior high), the Peanuts character Lucy, Tweety Bird, and the wooden tennis racquet and glass ornaments all hand painted by my Mom.

As a child, certainly there were elements of Christmas centered on presents under the tree. Yet, I don't remember many of those gifts which seemed so important at the time. Rather, what I recall is the Love and the moments that were shared with my family and others ... and the focus on Christ.

It is what makes this year with its pandemic most difficult. And yet so beautiful, as we are reminded that no Zoom call can replace a gathering, no YouTube video can replace listening to Handel's *Messiah* in person, and no wrapped gift will ever replace a hug.

Amy Greeson

Nº 44. – CHORUS
“HALLELUJAH!”

Rev. xix: 6; xi: 15; xix: 16

Allegro (♩=72)

Organ
or
Piano

SOPRANO
Hal-le-lu-jah! Hal-le-lu-jah! Hal-le-lu-jah! Hal-le-lu-jah! Hal-

ALTO
Hal-le-lu-jah! Hal-le-lu-jah! Hal-le-lu-jah! Hal-le-lu-jah! Hal-

TENOR
Hal-le-lu-jah! Hal-le-lu-jah! Hal-le-lu-jah! Hal-le-lu-jah! Hal-

BASS
Hal-le-lu-jah! Hal-le-lu-jah! Hal-le-lu-jah! Hal-le-lu-jah! Hal-

December 15, 2020

Anticipation!

It's a powerful word. The feeling of anticipation is often at its most exciting just before Christmas. For me, as a child, it felt like the air around us all was completely electrified in December!

Neighbors were busy adorning their doors with lights and shiny tinsel. As a family, we rode through neighborhoods to see just how the houses were embellished each year. We couldn't wait to see the next house's decorations or the windows at the uptown Belk's department store, with their lively characters foretelling the arrival of Santa Claus. Winter's nighttime chilly air welcomed onlookers.

While Christmas Eve and Santa Claus were on the minds of my younger sister and me for weeks, the anticipation of our older sister and her husband coming home for the holidays was exhilarating. We loved having them home and getting the hugs and kisses we missed so much. We were beyond thrilled to see the shiny packages they brought and placed under our tree.



As a college student, I could hardly wait for all my friends to be home from their respective schools. Seeing how everyone had changed was fun and yet they were still my old friends. What a delight!

So many ways we anticipate then and now. Waiting for the excitement, the lights, the colors, family and friends, and of course, waiting for the birthday of the precious baby of Nazareth. It offers the same electrifying feelings I felt as a child.

During Advent, we wait with Hope, Love, Faith, and Peace heralding the birth of God's only Son sent to earth for us.

What a gift indeed!

Heavenly Father, the provider of all good things, thank you for your love, your grace, and for your dear Son, Jesus Christ. May we receive this greatest gift ever given with Thanksgiving and Adoration. Amen.

Merry Christmas!

Penny Long Overby

*And his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. – Isaiah 9:6*

For peace of mind, resign as general manager of the universe. – Anonymous

Did you just laugh? Come on, be honest. If you did laugh, was it because it reminded you of someone, perhaps someone wearing your clothes right now?

PEACE can go running for the exit door when we have to be in control – of self, of family, of a committee, of coworkers, and dare it be said, of God. Yes, some people actually operate as if prayer is a way of controlling God! Good luck with that.

In these many months of facing a global pandemic, control seems to be nearly impossible. Yet, we still long for it. If not control, then comfort. PEACE. This is especially tough for us planners. Really hard to plan in a global pandemic, isn't it? Unsettling. Isn't it? Why, even venturing out to the grocery store has become a whole new ballgame. All sorts of rules to follow. Wear the mask (hopefully remembering to take a mask!); follow the directional arrows (IF you even see them); and keep your 6-foot distance (yeah, THAT always works).

Attending to these new rules of grocery shopping during COVID, I (Jane) planned to get just a few things. Walking at my usual quick pace, I passed a woman in a motorized cart. Well, almost passed. I noticed she was trying to put her cane in the basket. Near the BIG packs of bottled water. I asked, "Ma'am, do you need some help?" She promptly replied with a lilt in her voice, "Well, yes I do, Honey." Summoning strength I doubted I had, I loaded one gigantic pack of bottled water into her already-pretty-full basket, then loaded a second pack so that her feet rested upon it. She called me "Sugar" and "Sweetie" and expressed her gratitude repeatedly. We both felt valued. I noticed and helped her. She made me feel appreciated. A small gesture, for sure. During COVID, the small things seem to matter more. Especially the small, unexpected, and unplanned things. Things out of our control. That woman had no idea how she would get those huge packs of bottled water into her cart. I still have no idea why I stopped.

I (Randy) love to play golf, where I am always in control. HA! Golf is like getting into a car with no steering wheel. Some days I finish with a sense of frustration. But on my best days I begin my round before reaching the golf course. I begin with prayer, asking God to help me simply enjoy the outdoors and being with friends, accepting the score as consequential. Giving up control. It helps. Peace.

The Apostle Paul, as disciplined and mentally strong as ever any person, was honest enough to own up to not even being able to control himself. In Romans he wrote: *The things that I want to do I cannot do. And the things that I do not want to do I find myself doing.* Some of the things we want to do but cannot do this year may include gathering in worship, singing beautiful Christmas songs in a choir, traveling to visit seldom-seen family members, and carrying on longstanding traditions. And some of the things we do not want to do but find ourselves doing might be worrying, feeling sad, and losing hope. These feelings are certainly hard to control.

Does that mean we should not try to control ourselves? Of course not. But we must realize that we are limited. We WILL make mistakes. We WILL run ourselves insane (along with those around us) if we try to “manage the universe.” Especially right now. Instead, manage the moment. Notice more. Appreciate more. When you feel overwhelmed and out of control – and you will sometimes – forgive yourself, even as God, in Christ, has forgiven you. And be at PEACE.

Simple Thought for the Day:

**Today I will lay aside the need to be in control,
letting God’s peace claim and calm my soul.**

Randy and Jane Hall



We had one Advent calendar each Christmas when I was growing up. My grandmother would mail it to us from Connecticut in a manila envelope. My sisters and I took turns opening little doors to find pictures, and when we hung the calendar from the kitchen window latch, the picture behind each open door was like a tiny stained-glass window.

With my own three kids, we buy an Advent calendar with chocolates instead of pictures in the windows. And, because we have more of all kinds of “stuff” than I did as a kid, we also have three reusable calendars given to us over the years. There’s an Aussie calendar with a koala that travels from pouch to pouch for 24 days, and a felt calendar with ornaments in 24 numbered pockets below a felt tree on which to hang them. And my favorite is a storybook Advent calendar. Made of sturdy cardboard, it opens into a triptych, with 24 little bitty cardboard books tucked into paper pockets. The kids read one book each day, telling the Advent story.

My dad is a retired religion professor. Although my worst grades in college were in religion class, I have absorbed enough over the years to know that there are many Bible translations, and that some represent more scholarship than others. I’m not sure of the correctness of the details in our Advent storybook calendar. But I also don’t care too much (and I think my dad will forgive me this) for two reasons: (1) the big points are correct; and (2) the unfamiliar telling has led me to hear the story with fresh ears and a more personal understanding.

For one thing, reading this version of the story points me to the earthy reality of Mary and Joseph’s (and Jesus’!) own Advent experience. I put myself in Mary’s shoes. Skipping right past Mary’s acceptance of the immaculate conception—more than enough on its own to absorb—I empathize with the intrepid and very expectant Mary and Joseph making a mandated journey. I’ve never experienced anything comparable, but I know enough about expectant motherhood to be horrified at this thought.

Secondly, I am much more aware of the darkness and wickedness lurking around the edges of the story. I notice capricious rulers who, careless of

the human effects, move people. In order to count them. In order to tax them. I consider Herod's schemes and motives, and my back tenses.

And this leads me to the third and final aspect of the story I'm more aware of thanks to the storybook calendar: I am in awe at the mystical elements. The angels, dreams, and visions. And the willingness of Mary and Joseph, the wise men, and the shepherds ... to listen, to hear, and to believe.

I am left with the clarity that I want to be like them. I want to be the people who look east. I want to listen *for* the angels, and then listen to the angels. I want to fear not, to believe, and follow the star.

Susan Frye



But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. – Luke 2:10

When we read John 8:12, it says, “When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.’”

In this day and age, when we have so much that seems to be going so wrong, we need to remember that Jesus is all the light we need. This is the time we need to remember to take our eyes off the darkness around us and turn to Jesus. This is the time to find hope, joy, and light. We need to remember that Advent means “it’s finally here.”

With the celebration of the birth of Jesus, we can remember that the light of the world has come. He came to show us that God is with us.

Putting God first in one’s life was the lifestyle of Jesus Christ. Quite alone many times in his life of service, he set the example of being brave enough to please God in spite of the world. The world promised him an earthly kingdom, but for our sakes he became as a lamb led to slaughter.

Regardless of worldly rewards, this season needs to help us to remember that our major purpose in life is to live for service to God, should it not? Let us learn to be a candle of light in the darkness.

Paula B. Rainwater



December 19, 2020

Christmas Kitchen Memories

I knew immediately that I was in trouble. My mom, Grace, asked my five-year-old granddaughter, Tori, what her favorite meal was that I made for her. She replied: Toast. For a cook as gifted as Grace, that was a crushing blow and an abomination.

Our mom was one of the best cooks that I ever knew. My sisters each have inherited her skills, while I feel like Charlie Brown: I got a rock. Over the years, Bev and I attempted to bake three different desserts, and our failures are legend. Once we tried our hand at a caramel cake and used salt instead of sugar. When we tried to make a cobbler, we discovered that we were working from two different recipes – that would not have been so bad but after the cobbler was finished, I dropped a glass and it broke into the finished product. And lastly, when we were old enough to get into serious trouble, we made luscious devil's food and cream Whoopie Pies. As evil teenagers, I am afraid to say that we got into the cooking sherry and created a real fiasco. We were grounded for a month, and the kitchen cleanup was not worth the fun.

During the month of December, we never knew what we would find Grace working on. And now that I have moved beyond the "Toast" phase, I realize that mom's Christmas treats were far more than the physical food itself. Making the delights that Grace did took love, patience, painstaking skill, and devotion. Our dad was the perfect guinea pig. When the food looked pretty, he'd say, "It doesn't matter how it tastes as long as it looks good." When it looked awful, he'd say, "Well, at least it tastes good!"

Looking back, I realize now that Grace's sugar cookies were a thing of beauty. Each cookie had a different motif, but I never thought of our mom as creative. Boy was I wrong. Mom used 8 different cookie cutters and many different sprinkles, red hots, icings, and silver decorations. In my home, folks know better than to touch what I am making. At the Couch home, we were allowed to sample as Mom went. Even today, there are Couch recipes that make a holiday something special. My first "Meltaway" of the season was earth-shattering back then, and each year

I experienced Nirvana. We ate Cheese Cookies, Peanut Butter Fudge, Date Kisses, Cheese Balls, Sausage Balls, Baked Brie, Chocolate Fudge, and Pepper Jelly. Teri's specialty is Chex Party Mix, which we call Trash. Since she has the patience of Job, she's the one who has to fix it. First of all, it takes \$795 to make, and secondly, it requires four hours of back breaking sweat to continually turn the ingredients in the pan.

Penny Overby and I have a baking day each year, but I promise, our efforts do not contain that secret ingredient – unconditional love. While we have a great time and dancing is always an integral step of each recipe, I don't think my confections will ever measure up to Grace's or Penny's. For me, I just want to get it over with so I can move on to something else. But we three Couch girls were given a gift that we can never repay. Hopefully, we can carry Mom's time-honored traditions to our grandkids and their children. We were able to count on those goodies showing up year after year and we were fortunate to have a loving, faithful chef in our midst.

Vicki Connolly



December 20, 2020

BETHLEHEM, EXPECTATIONS, PREPARATIONS

Luke 2:8-11, 16

We know the nativity story from only two brief sources: The Book of Luke and the Book of Matthew. The first tells us of the inn and the shepherds; the second of the star of Bethlehem and the three wise men. In both, the story of Jesus' birth is told with exquisite beauty and simplicity. Nowhere else in literature is the marriage of miracle and innocence so felicitously performed.

The nativity, perhaps more than any other Biblical scene, is a profoundly visual experience. Only the Crucifix transcends it in its emotional impact. But the traditional Creche scene remains a symbol of blessedness that has acquired a language and life of its own through the ages.

It is for this that we approach Christmas with a sense of hope, a feeling that something wonderful not only has happened, but will happen again this year in us and in others. It is for this that we make advent wreaths and light the advent candles. It is for this that we make interior preparation as well as exterior ones.

Michel Quoist, in the book *Christ Is Alive!*, expresses it very beautifully: "Jesus Christ did not choose to use heaven as a podium from which to give man directions for the proper use and development of creation; and he did not choose to hand over a detailed set of instructions. Instead, he came down and entered into creation itself, into flesh and human life, in order to give roots and sap to the plant which is to bear the fruit of eternity."

Isn't this an exciting thought. It is for this we celebrate Christmas time.

Prayer: Our Father, we are coming to Christmas. It has become for many of us just a tradition, just a reenacting of an old story. Forgive us. It has

the possibility of being a celebration of dynamic dimensions, but so much depends on us. You came, you stayed, you are with us. May we hear that loud and clear this Christmas. Amen.



This devotion was prepared many years ago by my mother, Irene Swaim. I have enjoyed sharing it with you.

Sharon Newby

December 21, 2020

When I was a little girl, during Christmas I would see these beautiful white lit stars hanging on people's porches. I always loved them, and they brought me so much joy when I would see them during this special time of year. I didn't know the full purpose of the stars, nor did I know the true meaning of Christmas. The stars were a Moravian Christmas Star, and I always imagined and dreamed one day I would have one to display at my home when I became an adult.

Later in life, I learned the true meaning of Christmas and the star. It's not about trees, Santa Claus, or receiving gifts; I found it's much more. Christmas is celebrating our Savior's day of birth and giving to others. The star was a symbol of hope guiding the people to our lord and savior on that special night in Bethlehem. God gave us his only son, what an incredible gift. In Matthew, Chapter 2, verse 2, it reflects, for they "saw his star in the far-off eastern lands." And then in Matthew, Chapter 2, verses 9 and 10, it talks about the star again., it reflects "the star appeared to them again, standing over Bethlehem. Their joy knew no bounds."

In January of 2019, I heard one of the most meaningful messages that was one of those lightbulb moments in my life. Our former Minister Ben Devoid said "follow the star all year long, not just at Christmas." The star provides hope all year. Look at the star when we need help and God will always be there for us. Now, anytime I am going through a difficult time, or just having a bad day, I envision the star and think about those words; the star always provides hope all year. Not just during Christmas.

I imagine during this Christmas, and year, we all need to remember those words more than ever. I can imagine the star on that special night provided all the people hope, a hope they probably didn't think or believe existed. Maybe like some of us feel in 2020. God's son was born, and they or we would never have to walk that life alone, because he is always with us.

In 2007, Chris and I purchased our first home together. This was a year later, after he proposed to me on Christmas Eve of 2006. During that

Christmas of 2007, Chris bought me one of those beautiful Moravian Christmas Stars. He remembered my story I had told him of when I was a little girl. Every year, we hang that beautiful star on our porch, and it is my favorite Christmas decoration. We even had a special plug installed for our star when building our current home.



Christmas is a special time of year for us, but even more special now that, in this time in my life, I know the true meaning of Christmas and have Jesus as my personal savior. I will always be thankful for Jesus and knowing he and the star are always there for me, no matter how badly I might fail sometimes.

Merry Christmas, Memorial United Methodist Church. We love you.
Jessica and Chris Poole

December 22, 2020

Immanuel, God with us. Joy to the World!

Joy to the world, the Lord **is** come. Have you ever thought of that phrase? What kind of grammar is that? It sounds so unnatural and just plain weird! A quick search on the internet will show you that it was simply standard grammar when Isaac Watts wrote these lyrics back in 1719. There are some versions I have heard that have changed the words to the more modern “The Lord **has** come,” but I want to protest and suggest that we keep it as originally written for one simple reason ... it sounds theologically correct! Allow me to explain, and I think you will understand and really appreciate the deeper understanding of Christmas this small word “is” can provide.

When Jesus was born to Mary, many people know that it was for our salvation... that eventually this sweet baby would be crucified and die, but would then rise again victorious over death and providing a way for creation to be redeemed and renewed. But there are added benefits to Jesus’ becoming a man (as if salvation and eternal life were not enough). One of the biggest additional benefits is hinted at in the name that the prophet Isaiah says Jesus will be known as; “Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel.” (Isaiah 7:14) Matthew helps us understand that this means “God with us.” But God wouldn’t just be with us for a few short decades in first-century Judea; he would be with us always, “to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20)

Matthew bookends his Gospel with the name Immanuel and the phrase “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” This is significant. This is what makes Christmas an inaugural event and one that has been on repeat ever since. And I do not just mean every December 25th! Christ came once so that he could always be with us, EVERY SINGLE DAY. Christmas is an eternal event with eternal ramifications that just happened to take place in time. Every day, Jesus comes to us in special ways; in the poor and the sick, in the widow and the orphan, in the pastor and the parishioner, in the sinner and the saint, and most powerfully in the Holy Spirit. Jesus came to live among us so that he could die for us, that we might die to ourselves and, by the power of his

grace and the Holy Spirit, live for him and with him. It is an amazing and never-ending gift, but gifts are given to be received. Have you received it?

That brings us back to Isaac Watts' wonderful Christmas hymn. As we go through this advent season, let us not forget that Christmas does not end on December 25th, or January 5th. Let us remember that we can unashamedly sing, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come," meaning that the Lord did come, he will come, and he is always coming to us in each and every moment. Let us use this advent season as an opportunity to see the Christmas in our lives every day of the year and to receive the gift of Immanuel, God with us.

Benjamin Moore



December 23, 2020

Forever Santa

At that time, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a little child to him and placed the child among them. And he said: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.” Matthew 18: 1-5, NIV

Caroline, our 15-year-old daughter, has a rare genetic syndrome called Smith-Magenis Syndrome. She is a very happy young lady. It is a new day of joy every morning that she wakes up – often before 5:30 a.m., much to the chagrin of Richard and me. Her cognitive level will always be comparable to a 6- to 8-year-old. Caroline LOVES Santa Claus. I came to the realization a few years ago that she may always believe in Santa Claus. This is OK with me.

In the spirit of Santa Claus, Caroline LOVES to give people gifts. I am sure that many of you have been on the receiving end of her “gifts.” She will wrap up things from around the house. She will give away anything. We jokingly liken it to the character Aunt Bethany from the movie *National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation*. Aunt Bethany arrives at the home of the Chevy Chase character, Clark Griswold, on Christmas Eve presenting two gifts. One is her live cat that she wrapped up, and the other gift is a wrapped and melted lime Jell-O mold.

The season of Advent provides us with a special opportunity to prepare for the celebration of Christ’s coming at Christmas. May our preparations for Advent, not unlike Caroline’s year-long preparations, bring glory and



honor to God. May our focus be on preparing our hearts for Jesus' second coming. Lord, you choose the weak such as the little children and those with special needs to show the way. Lord, use those individuals in powerful ways to advance your Kingdom.

We thank you, heavenly Father, for Your faithfulness during this season of Advent as we prepare for Your Son's second coming. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Cheryl Herman

Christmas Eve, December 24, 2020



*“And he puzzled three hours, till his puzzler was sore.
Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn’t before!
‘Maybe Christmas,’ he thought, ‘doesn’t come from a store.’
‘Maybe Christmas...perhaps...means a little bit more!’
And what happened then? Well...in Whoville they say,
That the Grinch’s small heart Grew three sizes that day!”*
– Dr. Seuss (*How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, 1957)

OK, this might not be the “inspirational verses” that you were expecting for a Christmas Eve devotion, but in my house, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, by Dr. Seuss, has become its own holiday tradition! In fact, we make a point to watch the movie version (2000) starring Jim Carrey every year. There is just something about his facial expressions and body movements that brings the big, green “mean one” to life like no one else could! But even more inspiring than the acting performance, I find this story to be a beautiful tale of transformation, reconciliation, and even redemption. I encourage you to watch the movie. But in case you have not, here is a brief summary.

The Grinch lives on Mt. Crumpet, overlooking the little town of Whoville. The population of Whoville (known as “the Whos”) LOVES Christmas, and they do it BIG with lots of “toys,” and children making lots of “noise,” a big “feast” where they eat a “Who-beast” and even more “singing” and Christmas bells “ringing!” The Scrooge-like Grinch hates everything about Christmas, mainly because, we are told, his heart is “three sizes too small!” So, one winter, the Grinch decides to stop Christmas, breaks into every house in the town of Whoville, and steals all the gifts, Christmas goodies, and decorations.

Now, at this point, you may be thinking that the Grinch doesn’t have too much in the way of redeemable qualities. Then, near the end of the story, the Grinch has taken the entirety of his ill-gotten Christmas plunder to the top of Mt. Crumpet to destroy it by dumping it down the mountain, causing immense Who-pain and sadness. Just as his evil

plan is about to reach its inevitable conclusion, he pauses to listen for, and bask in, the cries and wailing of the Whos' despair. As the Whos convene at the town square to figure out what had happened to Christmas, Cindy Lou Who comes to a very timely understanding that there is more to Christmas than all of the "trappings." This leads the Whos not to cry, but rather to join together and burst out in song, which is what the unsuspecting Grinch ends up hearing during his "pause." This confuses the Grinch and sends him on a soul-searching moment of introspection. That moment is when he says the lines found above (and permanently etched into my heart): "*Maybe Christmas... perhaps... means a little bit more...*," followed by a threefold growth of his own undersized heart!

I feel like this year, of all the Christmases that I have experienced, will be the most challenging in terms of maintaining meaningful traditions, gathering with friends and family, and finding some sort of normalcy. It is as if a GIANT, Grinch-shaped, COVID Pandemic has come to steal our Christmas and test our established holiday way of life. The good news is that, just as Cindy Lou Who was able to reset the expectations for the little town of Whoville (and, in the process, transform the Grinch's heart and turn a sad situation into a moment of community, peace, and joy), perhaps this year we, too, will have an opportunity to re-commit ourselves to the aspects of Christmas that truly matter. Perhaps we can find transformation, not because we have illuminated and adorned the outside of our homes with lots of lights and decorations, possibly putting us at odds with our neighbors. Our transformation originates from the light that comes from within our hearts which inspires us to reach out in compassion and serve our neighbors. Perhaps we can find reconciliation, not because we share a decadent meal together that puts us to sleep for the day and inspires us to get on a treadmill in the new year. Our reconciliation comes because we are awakened to the beauty that we all share in the same decadent love offered to us by our Creator and Savior which prompts us to build strong and lasting relationships.

Perhaps our redemption can't be found in the gifts that are bought in a store and always seem to break or lose their luster by New Year's. Our transformation is found in a babe in a manger in Bethlehem over 2000 years ago, who was Crucified on our behalf but still lives and gives our lives purpose! Maybe the very thing that frustrated the Grinch about Christmas was that the Whos had lost their way and began to worship only Christmas and not Christ. May all of our hearts grow this Christmas season as we seek the true meaning that sets us apart and fills us with love, joy, and peace!

From our family to yours...

Rodney, Martha Jo, Gracen, Daelyn, Deacon (and Charlie!) Denton

MERRY CHRISTMAS!

Finally! It is Christmas Day!

This is the day that children and adults have been looking forward to for a long time. The anticipation has been building because we have been surrounded by sights, sounds, and smells that heightened our sense of expectancy. With every sense tuned in, we have been told that something big was about to happen. Today is the day!

Even the church has participated in creating a sense of excitement. In fact, the church has dedicated four weeks to this season called Advent. This season has included the tunes of familiar carols, lighting of candles, readings from the birth story of Jesus, and opportunities to worship. Today is the crescendo!

If you have small children in your home, I suspect your celebration of Christmas Day began much earlier this morning. Even as I type these words, memories of Christmas mornings flood my mind.

I could hardly get to sleep on Christmas Eve because I knew that Santa would be visiting my house in a few short hours. After finally surrendering to sleep, my eyes would fly open and I would rush to wake my mom and dad and then dash to the den to see what Santa had left for me.

On one occasion, just when I thought I had surveyed all of the gifts that had been delivered, and the initial excitement had begun to subside, my mom came into the room with another gift. It seems that Santa had somehow left a gift in a closet and had forgotten to place it among the other items. My young mind gave little thought as to why Santa had made such a mistake. The gift was unexpected and came as an added surprise.

Far beyond the excitement that comes from ripping open festively wrapped packages and finding the toys or items that we have hoped for, or emptying an overstuffed stocking that was hung by the chimney with care, or even the joy received through the giving of gifts, there is one more gift.

It will not be wrapped in festive paper adorned with a matching bow. It was not selected from the Sears Christmas Wish Book. Santa did not leave it. It's not to be found hiding behind the tree, nor is it in the bottom of the stocking that was hung with care. It is, however, quite personal, and exactly what everyone needs.

Hopefully, everything associated with Christmas has pointed us in the direction of the more important gift that is given on this day. Occasionally, a lone voice or a peculiar reminder will mention that what we really celebrate today is a gift from God.

As an act of tremendous love, God put on human flesh and came to dwell among us in the form of a baby. That is Christmas! It is a good thing He did, because humanity was in such a state that we could not help ourselves. Recognizing a need for God and the forgiveness that God could offer, the faithful offered sacrifices, attempted to follow incredibly difficult laws, and discovered that it was not possible to earn God's love.

Today we celebrate because God did something for us that we could never do for ourselves. He sent us a Savior. Wrapped not in foil paper and tissue but a few odd pieces of cloth. The Son of God was born to parents who did not have a stable home life; they had to borrow a stable for his appearing. In spite of these austere conditions, the angels sang, the stars shined brightly in the night sky, and people came from miles around to see this great thing that God had done. This is Christmas.

On this day, I hope that you will receive this gift from God. And on this Christmas Day, just maybe you need to be the very one who reminds others the reason that we celebrate.

Merry Christmas!
Danny Leonard



INDEX BY AUTHOR LAST NAME

Tracy Brinkley	December 8 th
Roger Bryant	December 3 rd
Lynn Carrick	December 12 th
Vicki Connolly	December 19 th
The Denton Family	December 24 th
Chris Eddinger	December 1 st
Allison Finch	December 4 th
Linda Fitzgerald	December 6 th
Susan Frye	December 17 th
Amy Greeson	December 14 th
Randy and Jane Hall	December 16 th
Ken and Charlotte Hanner	December 7 th
Lynda Hepler	November 29 th
Cheryl Herman	December 23 rd
Mike Lanning	December 9 th
Danny Leonard	December 25 th
Chris McCullough	December 2 nd
Benjamin Moore	December 22 nd
Sharon Newby	December 20 th
Norris Norwood	December 13 th
Penny Long Overby	December 15 th
Jessica and Chris Poole	December 21 st
Paula B. Rainwater	December 18 th
David and Erin Shew	December 2 nd
Mallory Smith	December 10 th
Stan and Shelton Styers	November 30 th
Harold Vannoy	December 5 th
Kyles Wallace	December 11 th