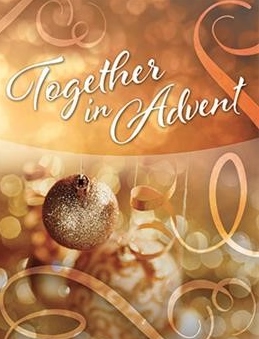
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**2017 Advent Devotional**

**First Presbyterian Church**

**216 South 34th Street**

**Omaha, Nebraska 68131**

**402-345-5383**

**2017 Advent Calendar**

**Week #1** **Midweek @ Midtown Dinner** Please make a reservation

Wed. 11/29 First Presbyterian Calvin Hall 5:45 p.m.

**Wed. Advent Worship**: 11/29 First Presbyterian 6:30 pm

**First Sunday of Advent**: 12/3 **Worship and Communion**

First Presbyterian Church Sanctuary 10:30 a.m.

**Advent Workshop: 12/3**

**First Presbyterian Church Knox Dining Hall 11:30 a.m.**

**Week #2** **Midweek @ Midtown Dinner** Please make a reservation

Wed. 12/6 First Presbyterian Church Calvin Hall 5:45 p.m.

**Wed. Advent Worship**: 12/6 First Presbyterian 6:30 p.m.

**Second Sunday of Advent**: 12/10

**Sunday Worship: Christmas Cantata, “One Silent Night”**

First Presbyterian Church Sanctuary 10:30 a.m.

**Week #3** **Midweek @ Midtown Dinner** Please make a reservation

Wed. 12/13 First Presbyterian Church Calvin Hall 5:45 p.m.

**Wed. Advent Worship**: 12/13 First Presbyterian 6:30 p.m.

**Blue Christmas Service: Sat., 12/16**

**(meal provided, please make a reservation)**

**First Presbyterian Knox Dining Hall 11:30 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.**

**Third Sunday of Advent**: 12/17

**Sunday Worship: Children’s Christmas Celebration**

First Presbyterian Church Sanctuary 10:30 a.m.

**Wassail: 12/17**

**First Presbyterian Church Knox Dining Hall 7:00 p.m.**

**Week #4** **Midweek @ Midtown dinner** Please make a reservation

Wed., 12/20 First Presbyterian Church Calvin Hall 5:45 p.m.

**Wed. Advent Worship**: 12/20 First Presbyterian 6:30 pm

**Fourth Sunday of Advent**: 12/24 **Sunday Worship 10:30 am**

**Christmas Eve Prelude Concert: 12/24**

**First Presbyterian Church Sanctuary 4:30 p.m.**

**Christmas Eve Candlelight Worship: 12/24**

**First Presbyterian Church Sanctuary 5:00 p.m.**



*A voice of one calling: “In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway a highway for our God..”* (Isaiah 40:30)

Advent is a time of preparation. As Christians, we prepare for Christmas in many ways. Some of these have little to do with the true meaning of Christmas: the birth of Jesus, our Lord and Savior. We hope this devotional booklet will help you prepare for Christmas by spending some time each day reading the Word of God and spending time with Him.

*Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift.* (2 Corinthians 9:15)

Advent is also a time of gifts; we think of the gifts we will be giving and those we’ll be receiving. We give this booklet to you as a gift as well. We hope it will help you to reflect on the blessed gift we have all been given as we count down the days until Christmas.

*We have different gifts, according to the grace given us.* (Romans 12:6a)

*Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the Church.* (1 Corinthians 14:12b)

These devotionals were all written as a gift to you by First Presbyterian Church members and staff who were willing to use their gifts to “build up the Church”. We are grateful to all of them.

**Have a wonderful Advent as you prepare to celebrate God’s gift to the world, our Lord Jesus!**

**The Congregation & Staff of First Presbyterian Church**

**Saturday, December 2 The Day Before Advent**

**Getting Ready**

**Scripture:** Luke 12: 32-38 *Don’t be afraid, little flock. For it gives your Father great happiness to give you the Kingdom. Sell what you have and give to those in need. This will fatten your purses in heaven! And the purse of heaven have no rips or holes in them. Your treasures there will never disappear; no thief can steal them; no moth can destroy them. Wherever your treasure is, there your heart and thoughts will also be.*

*Be prepared—all dressed and ready—for your Lord’s return from the wedding feast. Then you will be ready to open the door and let Him in the moment He arrives and knocks. There will be great joy for those who are ready and waiting for His return. He himself will seat them and put on a waiter’s uniform and serve them as they sit and eat! He may come at nine o’clock at night—or even at midnight. But whenever He comes there will be joy, for His servants who are ready.*

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**Reflection:** This is the season of getting ready for Christmas. It seems that the older we get, the more quickly the season comes around again! A recent sermon highlighted the story of the ten bridesmaids who were going to meet the bridegroom. When he was delayed, the foolish ones had not prepared with adequate oil for their lamps, and they missed out on the wedding feast.

I have never been a fastidious housekeeper. Perhaps I can attribute this to my upbringing in a family of eleven children growing up in an old farmhouse. Maybe it’s because I can always find other more creative things to do, such as practicing music, sewing, gardening, reading, etc. Maybe it is because I now live alone and am comfortable in my surroundings. The incentive to clean house and get things in order comes when I know someone is coming to visit. Then the job becomes top priority and the effort is rewarded with a wonderful visit from friends or relatives that I love.

I have to ask myself: “Am I ready for Christ’s return?” How should I be preparing? The following are three things that I feel are important:

1. Keeping in close contact with Him through prayer and absorbing His Word.

2. Sharing the gospel with friends and relatives who do not have a relationship with Him.

3. Giving (or going) to spread the good news of the gospel to those in faraway places who have never heard of God’s gift of eternal life through His Son.

**Prayer:** Lord, may I be like the shepherds and the wise men who recognized Your coming the first time, and acted immediately to search for You. Make me to be watchful and ready for your second coming and to share the good news of the Gospel with those all around me. Amen

Contributed by Joyce Reimer

**December 3 The First Sunday in Advent**

**Advent Again**

**Scripture:** Luke 1:29-33 *She* [Mary] *was thoroughly shaken, wondering what was behind a greeting like that. But the angel assured her, “Mary, you have nothing to fear. God has a surprise for you: You will become pregnant and give birth to a son and call his name Jesus. He will be great, be called ‘Son of the Highest.’ The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David; He will rule Jacob’s house forever— no end, ever, to his kingdom.”*

Luke 1:29, NRSV *But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.*

**Reflection:** Well, the calendar has changed to December reminding us that another advent season has come around again. The trees have dropped their leaves and the temperature is changing reminding us that winter is upon us. Soon our houses and neighborhoods will be decked in festive merriment and our calendars will be filled with parties and other activities. The hustle and bustle of Christmas will quickly be at full speed, and in the blink of an eye it will be only a memory.

But, what if this Christmas season were different? What if these next four weeks we were intentional about slowing down and taking moments to ponder the wonder of the season?

Twice in Luke’s Gospel we are told that Mary pondered all that was happening. In Luke 1:29 we are told she pondered the words of the Angel who told her she was going to have a baby. Later in Luke 2:19 we see her again pondering the events of the night as she just had a visit from the shepherds on the night her son was born. The New Living translation says, *Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often.* Mary pondered those precious moments and probably all the moments after that for the rest of her life.

So, what if we took the words Peace, Joy, Hope and Love as more than simply words but rather a new mindset?

* May the *Peace* of the new born king, the Prince of Peace, fill all our anxious moments.
* May the *Joy* found at the manger in the eyes of the tiny newborn savoir king, overflow from our hearts.
* May the *Hope* of the arrival of the long-awaited Messiah, overwhelm us with the faithfulness of a God who keeps his promises.
* May the *Love* of God, who sent his only Son, Jesus, Emmanuel God with Us, envelope us.

Imagine how this Advent could be different and lead us into a New Year filled with amazing moments with which we can slow down and ponder all that God has done.

**Prayer:** God, help us to slow down this Advent. Help us to not be overwhelmed with the busyness of the season but rather pause to remember the true reason for the season. May we be filled with your Peace, may Joy overflow from us, may we be overwhelmed with your Hope and may we be enveloped in your Love. May this advent be not just another advent, but may it truly be a new beginning. Amen.

Contributed by Pastor Jenni Blake

**December 4 The First Monday in Advent**

**On Your Knees and Looking**

**Scripture**: 2nd Kings 1:1-15 *After Ahab’s death, Moab rebelled against Israel. Now Ahaziah had fallen through the lattice of his upper room in Samaria and injured himself. So, he sent messengers, saying to them, “Go and consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron, to see if I will recover from this injury.”*

*But the angel of the Lord said to Elijah the Tishbite, “Go up and meet the messengers of the king of Samaria and ask them, ‘Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going off to consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron?’ Therefore, this is what the Lord says: ‘You will not leave the bed you are lying on. You will certainly die!’” So, Elijah went. When the messengers returned to the king, he asked them, “Why have you come back?”*

*“A man came to meet us,” they replied. “And he said to us, ‘Go back to the king who sent you and tell him, “This is what the Lord says: Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are sending messengers to consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron? Therefore, you will not leave the bed you are lying on. You will certainly die!”’”*

*The king asked them, “What kind of man was it who came to meet you and told you this?” They replied, “He had a garment of hair and had a leather belt around his waist.” The king said, “That was Elijah the Tishbite.” Then he sent to Elijah a captain with his company of fifty men. The captain went up to Elijah, who was sitting on the top of a hill, and said to him, “Man of God, the king says, ‘Come down!’”*

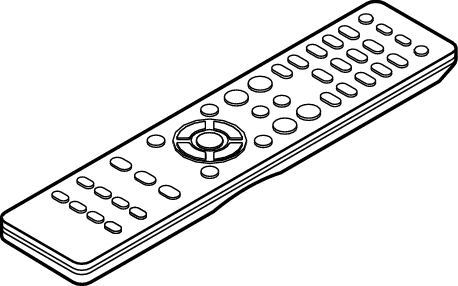
*Elijah answered the captain, “If I am a man of God, may fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men!” Then fire fell from heaven and consumed the captain and his men. At this the king sent to Elijah another captain with his fifty men. The captain said to him, “Man of God, this is what the king says, ‘Come down at once!’” “If I am a man of God,” Elijah replied, “may fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men!” Then the fire of God fell from heaven and consumed him and his fifty men. So the king sent a third captain with his fifty men. This third captain went up and fell on his knees before Elijah. “Man of God,” he begged, “please have respect for my life and the lives of these fifty men, your servants! See, fire has fallen from heaven and consumed the first two captains and all their men. But now have respect for my life!” The angel of the Lord said to Elijah, “Go down with him; do not be afraid of him.” So Elijah got up and went down with him to the king.*

**Reflection:** A few years ago, as I was taking laundry to the kitchen, I knocked the remote off the TV table. I looked for it after the laundry was going, but couldn't find it. When I asked God to show me where it was, there was no parting of clouds and shaft of light, so I just kept looking, but still didn't find it. After I'd looked everywhere it could be, and still hadn't found it, I decided I'd better start looking where it *couldn't* be. The refrigerator, the bathroom closet, my sock drawer. Finally, the only place left to look was the comfy chair, in those spaces where popcorn occasionally scurries to flee certain consumption. Right, well, I did find some popcorn, and a quarter that was sort of undecided as to whether it was lodged in a crack, or stuck there. I had to work it loose, which was particularly difficult with my wrist convoluted in order to reach there in the first place. But I got it, and decided I'd better put it in the mint tin in my purse, where I keep quarters and spending money. So, I got the tin out of my purse, immediately (and accidentally) dropping the lid of it as I opened it. It caromed under the computer hutch, but I'd seen the direction it had gone, so I got on my knees and reached. It had landed next to the lost remote, which had itself landed keypad down, so the black side in the darkness had escaped my notice. Yes, God had done exactly what I'd asked him to do, and in such a preposterously entertaining way as to bugger the likelihood of it being coincidence.

Now you're wondering what this has to do with the scripture reading, aren't you? Well, the king wanted Elijah just about as promptly as I wanted my remote. But it wasn't until that third Captain of Fifty was on his knees, kind of like I was, that Elijah presented himself to the king.

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, may our confidence as we approach you in prayer be solely in our dependence on you,

Contributed by Stacy Katczinsky



**December 5 The First Tuesday in Advent**

**Socks for Christmas!**

**Reflection:** Sherri and I enjoy a good laugh, and one comedian in particular makes us laugh every time: Jim Gaffigan. His routine about what the disciples may have gotten Jesus for His birthday is a classic example and goes something like this:

Jesus: Oh wow! A pair of socks. That’s great. You do know I’m dying for your sins, right? But hey, they’ll go great with my sandals, what am I? German?

Funny thought really, getting Jesus something like socks for Christmas, His birthday. Then as the last little laugh or smiles fades, an honest question remains. One I think we rarely consider. What will we give Jesus for His birthday? What present will we give Him.

I’d like to suggest the answer to the question is almost found in the question itself. The answer is the present of our presence, a close relationship with Him.

One of my favorite authors is Donald Miller and in his book ‘Searching for God Knows What’, he writes about being in Yosemite and the beauty of it all reminding him of the Garden of Eden. Miller notes, ‘And then it hit me how awful it must have been for Adam and Eve to be deceived by Satan, to have been tricked into breaking their relationship with God…. I wondered at how terrible it must have felt, at the fear of no longer feeling God, at the ache of emptiness and sudden horrifying awareness of self.’

And I know that seems like an odd quote for Christmas, but really, it speaks to the greatest loss mankind ever experienced which we now at Christmas celebrate as the greatest gift ever, a restored relationship with God. He gave us His presence in the manger and in our hearts. Your love, your presence is the perfect gift in return. Together, His gift of a restored relationship, and your presence make the greatest pair ever, one that looks good even with sandals.

Contributed by Keith Petersen

**December 6 The First Wednesday in Advent**

**On a Journey**

**Scripture:** Matthew 11: 28 All *who are weary he will give you rest*. Proverbs 3: 5 *Trust in the LORD with all your heart*.

**Reflection:** Some may remember that in 2016 I relocated and now live in Overland Park, KS. One of my first concerns after settling in my new home was to find a new church home.  Having been a member of First Presbyterian Church for over 25 years church shopping was going to be another new adventure.  Where to start?

First stop was to Parkwood Presbyterian - not far from home.  Very friendly people in a quite small church setting, was invited to join all for pot luck lunch following worship service, however, learned church was associated with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.  Not familiar with this group, so I’ll keep shopping.

Checked in at Rolling Hills Presbyterian Church, suggested by Gloria Stover and I thank you Gloria.  Once again friendly somewhat but a long distance from my home and a two-service congregation and first service folks very anxious to catch up with second service folks, but is PC (USA).  Maybe better look closer to home.

Overland Park is really a large area so went on line and found New Hope Presbyterian as they housed a food pantry, over in Olathe. I could manage that distance, but discovered it was a PCA congregation who do not allow women of the congregation to serve as deacons and elders, but they do allow Presbyterian Women to serve a LARGE coffee hour.  Having served as both a deacon and an elder at FPC I am sure this is not for me.

Onward to another PC not too far away - Colonial PC - wow a big suburban campus - very friendly - a lot of youth but now PCA sect who do not ordain women.   What are all of these differences and where is a PC (USA) like I am used to?

Back to the internet where I stumbled on to PC of Stanley - not too far away; but what is wrong here - large beautiful church but very few worshipers.  No choir, no youth, not very friendly and a supply Pastor.  But It is PC (USA). Should I continue shopping, or do I find out what their story is?  Come to find out they had suffered a BIG split two-years previously and the Church was enduring a legal trial.   It had been a large congregation and most had followed the pastor who turned to PC (EPC).  Approximately 80 strong believers remained and ended winning the court battle and keeping their church building and hopefully moving forward.

Can I fit in here?  I decided I would be a “pew sitter” and see what develops.  I joined as an “associate” member which allows me to continue to be a member of FPC.  However, more things are in store for this congregation as now the church is a ministry of a very large Presbyterian Church located in Prairie Village, KS. No longer PC of Stanley it now is known as Village on Antioch with a borrowed minister from V on Mission and Sunday message is via screen by senior pastor Tom Are of V on Mission.  Who would have thought - Karma and a screen?

Is my church shopping journey over?  I hope so as it has been weary but interesting and I have learned so much.  Knowing that the Lord was with me on this journey I look forward to what is ahead.

**Prayer**:  Dear Lord, at one point or another in our lives, we are all just like Mary and Joseph on their journey to Bethlehem in Judaea:  we move, and we search.  Even if we know why we are on the journey, things don’t always happen as we plan.  Help us to remember that no matter where we end up in our lives, You have a plan for us that has been lovingly and thoughtfully designed.

Contributed by Karma Blongewicz

**December 7 The First Thursday in Advent**

**The Real Story of the 12 Days of Christmas**

**Scripture:** Luke 2:8-14 *And in that region, there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, “Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and 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 among men with whom he is pleased!”*

**Reflection:** I have always liked the Christmas Carol, “The Twelve Days of Christmas”, here is the origin of this favorite Carol.

The actual twelve days of Christmas begin on Christmas Day, December 25th, and continue through January 5, which is the eve of Epiphany. In liturgical Christianity, Epiphany is the season which commemorates the visit of the Magi, often referred to as kings or wise men, to the infant Jesus. Since the Bible says that the Magi brought three gifts (gold, frankincense and myrrh) to Jesus, some Christian traditions assume that there were three wise men. There is no actual scriptural reference to how many kings came to visit Jesus. In Catholic Hispanic culture, January 6 is widely celebrated as the Day of the Three Kings, or just the Day of the Kings. Gift-giving is often reserved for this day instead of Christmas Day or Christmas Eve. In some communities, 12 days of Christmas gifts are given during the period between Christmas Day and the beginning of Epiphany.

The night of January 5, is referred to as Twelfth Night, a phrase many people recognize because of William Shakespeare’s play of the same name. Twelfth Night celebrations are primarily a European phenomenon, and they usually involve taking down Christmas decorations, drinking wine and reflecting on the visit of the Magi. Because the 12 days of Christmas coincide with the New year, it is speculated that the pagan New Year celebrations of northern Europe heavily influenced how Westerners observe Christmas.

There is one Christmas Carol “The Twelve Days of Christmas” that has always baffled me. What in the world do leaping lords, French hens, swimming swans, and especially the partridge who won’t come out of the pear tree have to do with Christmas? Here is its origin: From 1558 until 1829, Roman Catholics in England were not permitted to practice their faith openly. Someone during that era wrote this carol as a catechism song for young Catholics.

It has two levels of meaning: the surface meaning plus a hidden meaning known only to members of their church. Each element in the carol has a code word for a religious reality which the children could remember.

\* The partridge in a pear tree was Jesus Christ.

\* Two turtle doves were the Old and New Testaments.

\* Three French hens stood for faith, hope and love.

\* The four calling birds were the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke & John.

\* The five golden rings recalled the Torah or Law, the first five books of the Old Testament.

\* The six geese a-laying stood for the six days of creation.

\* Seven swans a-swimming represented the sevenfold gifts of the Holy Spirit – Prophesy, Serving, Teaching, Exhortation, Contribution, Leadership, and Mercy.

\* The eight maids a-milking were the eight beatitudes.

\* Nine ladies dancing were the nine fruits of the Holy Spirit-Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness, and Self Control.

\* The ten lords a-leaping were the ten commandments.

\* The eleven pipers piping stood for the eleven faithful disciples.

\* The twelve drummers drumming symbolized the twelve points of belief in the Apostles’ Creed.

Whether or not you are concerned with the origins of the “12 days of Christmas,” it’s a fun and nostalgic holiday staple that never fails to bring smiles and pleasant recollections. For the faithful, singing it can be an act of learning and devotion to God. For some people, it’s a tradition that’s synonymous with Christmas, and no holiday celebration would be complete without it. For still others, it’s simply a fun song to sing, with plenty of opportunities to stumble over phrases and giggle with friends and family. Whatever the song means to you, the 12 days of Christmas (the song and the season) are all about reflection, devotion, acknowledgment of loved ones, and the giving and receiving of priceless gifts.

**Prayer:**  Thank you Lord, for giving us Christmas Carols to sing as we prepare to celebrate your birth. Amen.

Contributed by Judy Boswell

**December 8 The First Friday in Advent**   
**Pray for the Bully**

**Scripture:** Luke 6:27-28 *But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you*.

**Reflection:** My Mother used to say, “Sticks and stones may break your bones, but words will never hurt you.” At the time, I believed her. When someone said something unkind, I would say or think the phrase my mother said and repeat it. I am guessing that many of our parents said that and you did the same thing.

Today we hear a lot about cyber bullying. A person can write something to or about someone without saying it to their face. And unfortunately, the whole world is able to read it, as well. With social media, it seems many are quick to give their “opinion” about someone without thinking of the consequences. Like “sticks and stones”, those are words that hurt.

What can we do? We can pray for the cyber bullies.

I have a friend that insists on everything being done her way. If it is not done her way, then she will send you a seething email explaining everything you have done wrong. In reality, it is not necessarily done wrong; it is just not done the way she would do it. A bully sees it as their way or the wrong way.

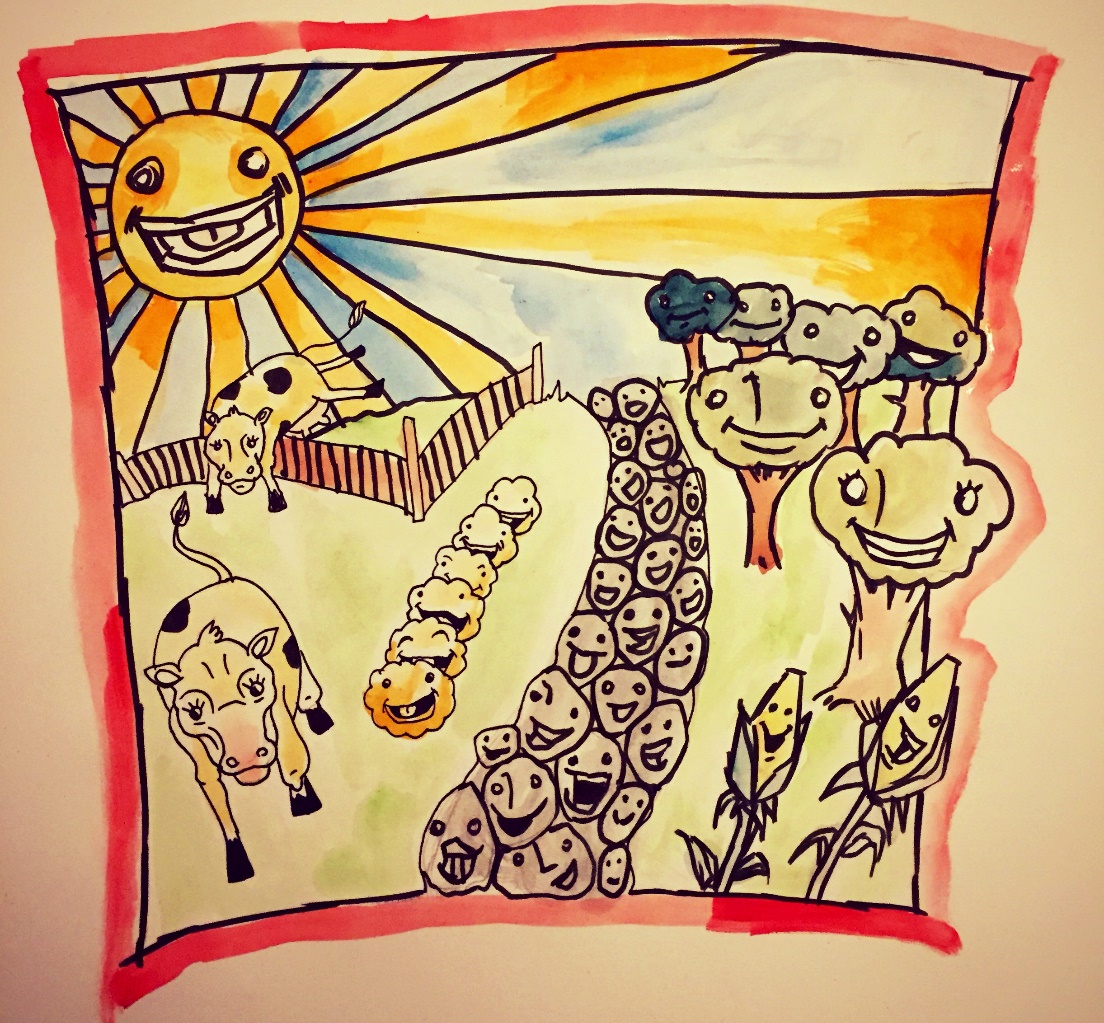
What can we do? We can pray for those who feel a need to bully others.

 When you are being bullied and these “sticks and stones” words are in our head, we need to love the person as our Savior taught us: “love your enemies, do good to those who hate you…” If you can find the way, through Jesus, to truly love that person and do good for that person, you will find that much of the hurt is lifted.  
 What can we do? We can pray to forgive the bullies.

**Prayer:** Jesus, please give us strength to look to You in hope and need as we learn to forgive those that bully us and others. Your Word says “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.” Please help us, every day, to do that with an open mind and forgiving heart. In Your Name we pray, Amen.

Contributed by Trudy Darling

**December 9 The First Saturday in Advent**  **Bursting with Cheer!**



**Scripture:** Luke 19:37-38 *If they kept quiet, the stones along the road would burst into cheers!* Luke 19:40

*This was Jesus’ reply to the religious elite when they tried to silence his followers as he rode the donkey into Jerusalem and “all of his followers began to shout and sing as they walked along, praising God for all the wonderful miracles they had seen. ‘Blessings on the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in highest heaven*!’”

**Reflection:** There are times we are silent when we should be exuberant. God’s Word is filled with this exuberance and will speak for itself even if we don't.

Malachi 4:2 in the ERV says, “*But, for my followers, goodness will shine on you like the rising sun. And it will bring healing power like the sun’s rays. You will be free and happy, like calves freed from their stalls*.” or the NLT has it “*leaping with joy like calves let out to pasture*”.  
 And Psalm 96:12 gives us a vision of that pasture they are leaping into, **“***Let the fields and their crops burst out with joy!  Let the trees of the forest sing for joy*”.

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, please fill us with your Spirit of peace and joy. Let our lives burst forth with cheer. Let our voices always sing of Your glory. Heal us with Your rays of light so that we might spring through life knowing that Jesus frees us from our sin; we’re no longer captive to our lower nature. Make us understand how really good this news is so that we can’t help but share it with the world.

Contributed by David McBride

Illustration by Fredy Rincon

**December 10 The Second Sunday in Advent**  **Help us Believe**

**Scripture:** Genesis 1:31 *God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good*.

**Reflection:** Sometimes it’s difficult to believe that this world is good.

**Prayer:** Dear God, help us more often see the good in your world and help us believe that we’re good also.

Contributed by Donald Allen Brewer

**December 11 The Second Monday in Advent**   
**He’s Coming!**

**Scripture:** Matthew 25: 1-46*Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten bridesmaids who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps.*

**Reflection**: The world is filled with people who aren’t happy that Christmas is already on the shelves of area stores and in the advertisements. Those really irritated have taken to the internet to voice their displeasure. I don’t like the blatant commercialism and wonder how many tables Jesus would overturn at the mall, but there are so many good aspects of Christmas that should last longer than the traditional 12 days.

Christmas has a way of digging itself into the hearts of even the nastiest of folks; many are more willing to reach out to those less fortunate during this time; many are just happier and kinder. The bright colors and joyful carols have a way of lifting sour moods and become those tunes we hum or whistle throughout the day. I would much rather keep hearing “Silent Night” in my head than “Wasted Days and Wasted Nights.”

As I hear the voices crying foul that it is too early for Christmas…I am reminded that Christmas is not simply a holiday all wrapped up in bows…it is a wonderful, glorious birth wrapped in swaddling clothes. Christmas should never be just one day of the year, it should be joyfully celebrated every, single day. As I notice the candy canes and ornaments across the aisle from the scary masks and pumpkins on the shelves, I pray that if the eye can see, the heart can also.

In church, we are reminded to be ready when Christ comes, to always be in the state of preparation because we don’t know when that day or hour will take place. We do, however, know that Christmas is December 25th; shouldn’t we do what we can to prepare for this miraculous day? Shouldn’t we fill our hearts with bright lights and shiny thoughts? Shouldn’t we be displaying our very best for all to see?

I’m not suggesting that we buy into every marketing tool being used during this time of year, but we do need to wake every morning to fill our oil lamps and their reserve tanks so when it comes time to meet Him, we will be prepared and not left in the dark.

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, help us to find the spirit of Christmas in our hearts every day and to always be prepared to share it with someone who needs a little light in their life.

Contributed by Sherri Petersen

**December 12 The Second Tuesday in Advent  
God’s Unfailing Love**

**Scripture*:*** 1 John 3:1 *How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!*

**Reflection:** Bible scholars and theologians usually list the attributes of God under two headings: His natural attributes and His moral attributes.

His natural attributes tell us of a God who is all-knowing, all-powerful, ever-present, eternal. His moral attributes tell us of a God who is holy, righteous, faithful, full of mercy and kindness, and who is love. To contemplate any one of these attributes by itself staggers us; but it is His undying love for us that thrills our hearts.

Some years ago, my wife and I were visiting the home of friends who live in Oklahoma City. We arrived midafternoon, and my wife went into the living room to join a ladies’ Bible study. I went into the back bedroom to prepare a message I was to give that night at a church banquet.

Some of the ladies had brought their children, who were playing just outside my window. A little boy named Jimmy shouted at a little girl, calling her names. “You’re a dummy,” he said. “You’re nothing but a silly dummy. And you’re ugly. And I don’t like you, you dummy.”

Suddenly I heard the little girl say with a sweet little voice, “Jimmy, I love you.”

I thought, *You what!? You love him? After all those cruel names he called you?*

And then it occurred to me, God says the same thing to us, all the time. People all over the world carve out images of God in the form of a snake or an ox or a dog, and say, in effect, “God, you are nothing but a dog. You’re a snake. You’re a dumb ox.” And God looks down from His throne in heaven and reaches out to them in mercy and kindness and says, “I love you.”

**Prayer**: Lord, You are absolute power and absolute holiness, yet You love me–though I am totally unlovable–with absolute love. Amen.

From the Navigators Daily Devotional,

Contributed by Joyce Reimer

**December 13 The Second Wednesday in Advent**

**Through Children’s’ Eyes**

**Scripture:** John 3:3 *Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again*.”

Matthew 18:3 *“and said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”*

**Reflection: C**hristmas is filled with many colorful characters! One of my favorite characters is the one that “everyone loves to hate” ---Ebenezer Scrooge! Charles Dickens is clever in his depiction of Scrooge. He presents two Scrooges: the one of Christmas Eve and the one of Christmas Day. By doing so the author stresses a great truth from the New Testament: “Except a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (John 3:3)

The Scrooge of Christmas Eve! Ebenezer is characterized as a doleful and miserable old man! He was selfish, miserly, hateful, mean and egotistical. He was self-centered, prejudiced and bigoted. He was completely unable to hear the angelic song of “Peace on earth, good will toward men.” (Luke 2:13) His Christmas Eve is portrayed as being cold, barren, bleak and miserable. In fact, Dickens surrounds him with the macabre ghost of Jacob Marley and the three unearthly spirits of “Christmas Past, Christmas Present and Christmas Yet to Come.” However, Marley’s ghost and the three ethereal spirits gain Ebenezer’s curiosity by contrasting the way things are with what they could be. And then, according to the story, Ebenezer wakes up out of this nightmare.

The Scrooge of Christmas Day! Waking from his nightmare he finds: “The bed post was his own and that best and happiest of all, the time before him was his own, to make amends in.” He had been given a second chance! What Dickens does is to give Ebenezer a conversion experience. He is “born again!” He is recast into a different person. And what did he do as a result? He buys the prize turkey and sends it to Bob Cratchit’s home. He astonishes his nephew by showing up for Christmas dinner! He even greets people on the street by saying: “A Merry Christmas to you.” He becomes a good friend to all, a good master to his employees, a good neighbor to those around him and even a “second father” to Tiny Tim. At the end of the story he replaces “Bah Humbug” with “Peace on earth, good will to all.”

In this portrayal of the **two** Scrooges--one of Christmas Eve and the other of Christmas Day--Dickens reiterates what Jesus once said: “Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3). You see Ebenezer came to enjoy Christmas just as Tiny Tim did, because he was now a changed man. He had become different because he began to understand the real meaning of the Nativity. He had finally heard the angels sing! He saw Christmas as Tiny Tim did: a day of expectation, enjoyment, excitement, enthusiasm. Perhaps, for the first time in his life, he saw through children’s eyes! When we understand the meaning of Christmas like this, the ghosts and spirits that haunt us will also be turned into the dawn of a new day.

**Prayer:** “Mighty God, in Jesus Christ you dealt with spirits that darken minds and lives. In the Nativity give us the incentive to “cast out” such dark forces and replace them with the light and glory of the Star of Bethlehem. Peace be to all.” Amen.

Contributed by Reverend William Osick

**December 14 The Second Thursday in Advent**  
**Maybe Christmas, Perhaps, Means a Little Bit More**

**Scripture:** [Romans 10:17](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans+10%3A17&version=ESV) *So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ*.



**Reflection:** Keith and I have a bit of an obsession with the Grinch. Many of our Christmas decorations are Grinch themed, we have a framed cell from the original movie that hangs in our house all year round, we use quotations from the movie in everyday life. My name is Sherri and I am a Grinch-aholic.

I know when my fascination began: I was in the sixth grade. My school used the Grinch script for a Christmas play. I was part of the group of students who memorized the story in order to narrate during the play. Now, many years later I can’t remember my kids’ names, Bible verses or what I drove to the grocery store to buy, but I can remember nearly every line of this Christmas classic. “All the Whos down in Whoville liked Christmas a lot, but the Grinch, who lived just north of Whoville did not!,,,And the Grinch grabbed the tree, and he started to shove, when he heard a small sound like the coo of a dove…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!’"

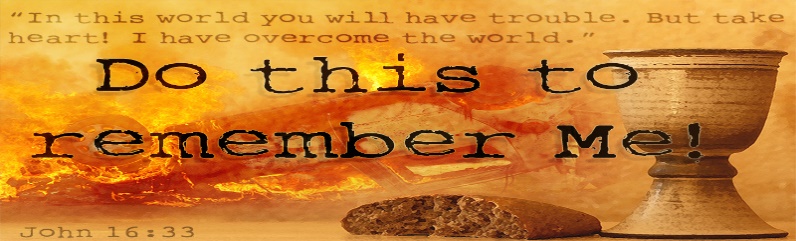
For years the Grinch endured having to listen to the joyful Whos expressing themselves through playing and song, determined that if he took all their “stuff,” they would have nothing to be happy about. He was wrong. The part of the story I have always loved is where the Grinch is on the tip top of Mount Crumpit, ready to dump all the decorations and gifts he stole from the Whos, when he hears them merrily singing and his “small heart grew three sizes that day!”

The Whos didn’t lecture him, they didn’t post insults on their Facebook pages, they didn’t file a complaint at the Whoville Police Station or sit in judgement of the Grinch. They joined hands and sang out loud, and that is all the Grinch needed. How do we share our joy? How do we treat others who don’t quite get it?

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, give me the confidence to know that the Holy Spirit is at work in all those who struggle, whether from shoes that are too tight, or a head not screwed on just right, or whose heart is two sizes too small. Help us to show our faith through Your Word, which never falls on deaf ears. Amen

Contributed by Sherri Petersen

**December 15 The Second Friday in Advent**   
**Come to the Table**



**Scripture:** 1 Corinthians 11: 23-25 *What powerful words….*

Do you think about coming to the table to partake in the bread and the wine (juice)?

Do you ask for forgiveness before you partake?

Do you praise and bless the life that was sacrificed so we could be saved?

Partaking of the bread and the wine is more than coming to the table or taking the elements as they are passed as we sit in the pews. Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, when He had given thanks he broke it and said, “*this is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me*.” In the same way he took the cup after supper, saying, “*this cup is the new covenant in My blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.*

**Reflection:** Dr. Cynthia M. Campbell in her book *God’s Abundant Table,* writes about the part of the quote, “Do this….*in remembrance of me*”, is perhaps the most important. That we are to shift our focus on the gathering of the community who follow Jesus Christ. That coming to the table is to remind us of what it is the Holy Spirit is calling us to do. Perhaps the coming as a community also reflects on our going out into the community, as Jesus Christ would do: To feed the hungry and clothe the naked.

Father Henri J.M. Nouwen in his book “*Can You Drink the Cup”,* focuses on how when we partake of the elements we blend the life and sacrifices of Jesus Christ and our own, becoming one cup, “always dying and always rising for the salvation of the world”.

Having communion in worship is always my favorite part of a service. Both the quote from Dr. Campbell and the insight from Father Nouwen add meaning to “Come to the Table” where there is much more for me to consider as I listen to the call of the Holy Spirit. Too often I look through narrow lenses when the call to reach out to God’s people is far beyond what I normally see. I find joy and hope in communion, it causes me to reflect with eyes and ears open to what Jesus is calling me to do and to ask for forgiveness when I fall short in following His call.

**Prayer:** “Come to the Table” is a call for all who believe. Please meet me at the table. The Holy Spirit will meet us there”. Amen

Contributed by Bonnie Brown

**December 16 The Second Saturday in Advent**   
**If My People Will Pray**

**Scripture:** Isaiah 30:19 *Therefore the Lord longs to be gracious to you, and therefore He waits on high to have compassion on you. For the Lord is a God of justice; How blessed are all those who long for Him. People of Zion, who live in Jerusalem, you will weep no longer. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when He hears it, He will answer you*.

Jeremiah 33:3 *Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.*

Psalm 145: 18-19 *The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfills the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cry and saves them.*

2 Chronicles 7: 14 *Then If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.*

Matthew 7:7 *Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you*.

**Reflection**: The intergenerational orchestra is rehearsing a beautiful piece called “If My People Will Pray” based on this scripture from 2 Chronicles. Throughout our studies this fall, I have been impressed with both the number of times in the Bible that we are called to pray, and the way in which we are reassured that IF we will just pray, God will listen and respond to the cries of our hearts.

When I think of the loving, attentive and generous God who sent Jesus, my thoughts run along the lines of “God, you know all that’s going on and what I need, what the world needs, even better than I do. Why do I need to ask?” But from the time of Jeremiah and Isaiah and David in the Old Testament, to the time of Jesus, to the modern day, and until the second Advent, God has reminded us (and me) that He wants to hear from the hearts of His people, from me.

We don’t need to have the beautiful words, the correct sentence structure, the right form. But God doesn’t want to have to read our minds while we sleep or go about our days either. He wants us to share the prayers of our hearts by choosing to come to Him.

This is the time of Advent, where we remember God’s first entry into our world so long ago and look forward to the second entry when He comes again to claim us all. What better time to answer this simple request of God’s – If my people will pray…

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, Through the prophets and through Jesus, you have been so clear and consistent in your message to us, that you want to hear from us. You ask us to come to you with the prayers of our hearts, yet we ask you, instead, to read our minds. We “hate to bother you” with our day-to-day issues, yet that’s all you really want. During this time of Advent, I want to share more with you – my sign of devotion and giving back for all that you’ve given me. Today, I offer you these prayers from my heart….

Contributed by Lori Snyder-Sloan



**December 17 The Third Sunday in Advent**   
**The Star Over Bethlehem**

**Scripture:** Matthew 2: 2, 9-10 *The magi asked “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him”…They (the Magi) went on their way and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.*

**Reflection:** Have you ever looked up to the sky at night and marveled at the sight? Here in town it is very hard to see the stars because of so much ground light. I still like to look and especially marvel when I see a full moon. It stands out so bright and I am in such awe of it that God gave us this “night light”. When I was at Arches National Park many years ago, I was struck by the brightness and the nearness of the stars. It seemed like I could just reach up and touch them. It was such a glorious and reverent sight. It seemed like time stood still. We have God, the creator, to thank for these bright twinkling spots in the sky. We also have God, the creator, to thank for the Baby we celebrate at this time of the year.

God planned for the sun, the moon and the stars, but He also gave us a baby that would change the world as he grew up. Mary knew her baby was destined for something great, but I’m sure that she did not know that he would be the savior of all mankind, that he would die on the cross for my sins, and your sins, and the sins of all the world. But God knew all this because it was His plan, just as it was His plan to create the sun, the moon, the stars, Jesus his Son and all of us. Let us praise the name of Christ Jesus forever and ever.

**Prayer:** Dear Lord in heaven, let us never forget that You are the Creator of this great earth and of our very existence. Let us be reminded each and every time we see the sun, or the stars, or the moon, that You are in our lives every minute of every day and every night. You gave us your Son to be our Savior and to die for our Sins. Thank you for ever and ever. Amen

Contributed by Arline Oliver

**December 18 The Third Monday in Advent   
God is Awake**

**Scripture:** Psalm 121 *I lift up my eyes to the hills. From whence does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved, he who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade on your right hand. The sun shall not smite you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and for evermore.*

**Reflection:** Sometimes I think about the people of the past and how scary the night must have seemed to them. Before there were gas or electric lights to cast a wide area of light, before there was TV or radio to fill up the quiet, the darkness and silence must have felt oppressive and the nights long.

A few months ago, Pastor Jenni preached a sermon about how God is always awake, and it reminded me of a song that I used to play for my babies as they were going to sleep. The lyrics are:

“Even the darkness is light to him; the night is as bright as the day, So, you are safe though the light grows dim; even the darkness is light to him. The father above does not slumber or sleep; he wakefully watches our way, Then, there’s no reason for you to weep; the father above neither slumbers nor sleeps. So, dry your eyes of angel blue and trust the one who died for you,

Would not Jesus safely keep the little ones he loves, asleep?

Even the darkness is light to him; the night is as bright as the day,

So, you are safe though the light grows dim; even the darkness is light to him.”

Isn’t that beautiful and comforting? This lullaby is by Michael Card from his album “Sleep Sound in Jesus”. You can listen to the melody with the words if you Google it and click on the You Tube link.

Finally, this short piece from Victor Hugo reflects the same message: “Have courage for the great sorrow of life and patience for the small one; and when you have laboriously accomplished your daily task, go to sleep in peace. God is awake.”

**Prayer:** Father, we are comforted knowing that we can rest peacefully, and that you are always there watching over us both day and night. Thank you for your loving care. Amen.

Contributed by Julie Symens

**December 19 The Third Tuesday in Advent**   
**Precious Gifts Are Not to be Hoarded**

**Scripture:** 2 Corinthians 9: 6-8 *Remember this: A stingy planter gets a stingy crop. I want each of you to take plenty of time to think it over, and make up your mind what you will give…God loves it when the giver delights in the giving. God can pour on the blessings in astonishing ways so that you’re ready for anything and everything, more than just ready to do what needs to be done.*

**Reflection:** I don’t think I’ve actually known someone who is a hoarder, someone whose home is so filled with things that they can’t move in their homes and their lives become dysfunctional because of their attachment to things. I have read about them, and I think there’s even a reality TV show about hoarders. It’s known to be a terrible illness, and very difficult to deal with the mental illness of “hoarding” which is tied to an emotional attachment to the things, as well as a need for control.

While only about 2% of the population could be diagnosed with the mental illness of “hoarder”, apparently so many of us are stingy with our “things” that God has addressed it in the Bible. Well here’s a true confession. I’m a hoarder, but not the type we see on TV or in books. If you’ve seen me at home, you know I’m much more likely to throw away or pass on things I don’t need. I have the rule that clothing not worn for a season should go to a new home, and I don’t like a lot of things around to clean around. No, I’m a hoarder of something more precious to me than things. I’m a hoarder of my time and energy. Top of my list of things to hoard is time with my family and friends, the greatest gifts God has given me. The most precious commodity I’m afraid of running short of is my time and energy, so I hold tightly to it. But I have begun to see this as the God-limiting emotion that it is.

As this scripture says, “God can pour on the blessings in astonishing ways”, and we know what a generous God we have. He’s so generous He even sent Jesus to us. Instead of fearing that I’ll run short, I should pray and trust God to provide what is needed.

**Prayer:** My dearest Savior, I’m sorry for saving back my time and energy out of fear of running out. In my mind I know that you provide whatever we ask for and need. I can see that this shows a lack of trust in you and the ability to make astonishing things happen. I’m sorry for not asking and trusting. Thank you for the gift of your son and all your other many gifts to me. Please help me to continue to build my trust in you and not limit what you are able to do in my life and through my life. Amen

Contributed by Lori Snyder-Sloan

**December 20 The Third Wednesday in Advent**   
**God’s Plans for Me**

**Scripture:** Ecclesiastes 3:1 *To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven.*

Jeremiah 29:11 *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.*

**Reflection:** Back in April, I got news of an audition for baton twirlers to be a part of a stage show, called Luma: Art in Darkness. This was the type of opportunity I had been waiting for, so I applied and sent in my audition video. The next few weeks were filled with uncertainty; through the multiple rounds of questioning, I began to doubt myself and my abilities—that I wasn’t right or good enough for the part. Yet deep down, I had a strong feeling that there was a bigger purpose for me in this event. For some reason, I was supposed to be there. God wanted me there. By the end of April, I was offered a position in the cast! Of course, I accepted! In June, I was on my way to California to take part in this exciting adventure.

During the second week of rehearsal, I began to understand why I was there. Some of the cast members were having a hard time dealing with our circumstances: living in a rental house with 11 people, the long rehearsal days, being away from family, personal struggles, dealing with the producer’s unusual antics, and then dealing with the choreographer’s mental breakdown. As I witnessed the changes in their moods and behaviors, I felt called to help. I was able to provide just the right comfort and support that each person needed. In some instances, the words and ability to do this could only have come from God, as this was fairly unnatural and uncomfortable for me to do. There was no other explanation.

One day, we had a cast meeting to discuss the producer’s poor behavior and how we could all help each other. Something came over me and I offered to lead the meeting, even though I am usually the one to sit back and observe. With God’s help, I was able to lead the group in a positive direction and help everyone arrive at a common understanding of each other. When the choreographer had a mental breakdown, she came to me for help. I had no idea what to do or how to even begin to help her. I just prayed that God would give me the ability, the words, and the actions to help. Without His help, I don’t know how we would have overcome this obstacle.

Despite my insecurities, I knew God had a special purpose for me there and that He used me in ways I couldn’t have imagined. Who would have thought quiet, little me would be the one to be a peacemaker, a comforter, a supporter, and a healer? I guess God did! He knew this and placed me there exactly for this reason and for His purpose. It was a season for me to learn, grow, and depend on God. How silly of me to doubt myself! I should know God gives each of us unique abilities to fulfill His purpose and to help others.

**Prayer**: Thank you, God, for knowing me better than I know myself. Thank you for using me in ways I couldn’t imagine (in ways that are sometimes uncomfortable), and to deepen my relationship with you. Help me to learn to trust you more and to understand that you know your plans for me. Like Jeremiah says, your plans for me will make me prosper, will give me hope, and will give me a future.

Contributed by Melissa McBride

**December 21 The Third Thursday in Advent**   
**God Comes to us in Miracles**

**Scripture:** Matthew 2: 1-2, 9 *Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold magi from the eat arrived in Jerusalem, saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.” And having heard King Herod, they went their way; and lo, the star which they had seen in the east, went on before them, until it came and stood over where the Child was.*

**Reflection:** There are so many wondrous things that happen in Christ’s being born, that it is hard for us to comprehend it well. A barren Elizabeth conceiving John (the Baptist) in her old age; the baby leaping in Elizabeth’s womb when her relative Mary greeted her; a virgin girl, Mary, becoming pregnant when the Holy Spirit came upon her; Joseph accepting the pregnancy of the one he was engaged to; an angel and a multitude of the heavenly host praising and glorifying God before the shepherds in the field; and the star that stood over where the child was. These are some of the miracles.

At our church retreat this past summer, we watched a DVD entitled The Star of Bethlehem. This video went into detail about what was happening with the movement of the star and planets at the time of Christ’s birth. (Since the stars and planets move in a consistent and orderly manner, it is no possible, with computer programs, to know the exact location of the star and planets on any given day in history). The presentation at the retreat indicated a brilliant light over Bethlehem was caused by two great planets (Jupiter – the king planet and Venus – the mother planet). This DVD is available in our church library. It is a fascinating and logical look at how the “star” over Bethlehem might have come to be. Is this the way it really happened? I don’t know. Just as with most of God’s miracles, we cannot explain or reason the how or why of these events. We can look at them with a critical eye, but in the end, accept them with the faith of a child, trusting in God’s care and love for us.

**Prayer:** Lord, we pray that we will all be filled with Awe, Wonder, Thankfulness, and Joy this Christmas season. You are in control of all. Amen

Contributed by Tom Helligso

**December 22 The Third Friday in Advent**   
**God’s Light can Shine in all Circumstances**

**Scripture :** Daniel 4:35 *And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing before him: for he doth according to his will, as well with the powers of heaven, as among the inhabitants of the earth: and there is none that can resist his hand, and say to him: Why hast thou done it?*

Philippians 1:12-3 *Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else...*

**Reflection:** Some of you know how little I liked the apartment I lived in these last few years. It had windows on only one side, so air didn't circulate easily, and those windows faced the street, with traffic noise I never got used to. At the risk of being melodramatic, it reminded me of a dungeon.

I know as well as Nebuchadnezzar did that we can't grab God by the sleeve and demand that he tell us what he thinks he's doing. But I also know that all of us at least once in our lives look up and ask, "Why is this happening? What are you thinking?" We don't always listen for an answer, and even when we do, we don't always hear it, and we never hear the answer we want to hear. Even when Nebuchadnezzar, like Job before him, was restored to his former state, there was no apology for the inconvenience, no gently worded explanation, just the stark implication that our foremost obligation is to live and learn as we walk humbly with our God.

Can any Christian think of a dungeon, and not think of the Apostle Paul, who had more or less walked the length and breadth of an empire only to end his journey in chains, in close quarters with half a dozen seasoned veterans of the Roman Legions? We can be certain he had questions, and that he waited for answers. Living in that apartment, I understood as I never could before that Paul's imprisonment was the strangest, most miraculous lampstand ever devised. From the darkest, most dismal corner of the empire, light poured out, and saturated those hardened Romans who spent eight to twelve hours each day with this old Jewish Christian who was also a citizen of Rome. They knew his story, knew that he had taken hold of his right, as a citizen, to personally present his defense to the Emperor when the Governor had been willing to dismiss the charges against him for a lack of evidence. Thus, they understood perfectly what he meant when he said he was a prisoner of Christ Jesus. Although the chains and shackles that held him, and the iron bars that confined him, were of Roman manufacture, it was his submission to an authority greater than Rome which had put him there, and they soon recognized it was this greater authority which had placed them in this apostle's presence, and also soon submitted themselves to this greater authority. The light streaming from that miserable dungeon poured over them, cleansed them and clothed them more thoroughly than their Imperial issue uniform ever could. They carried that light into the Imperial household, and throughout the empire.

Do I dare to suppose that in spite of my frequent self-centered grousing, this same light shines from my own inelegant surroundings? Do I dare to hope the exterminator who does his work here for few minutes each month, and the Jehovah's Witnesses who have tapped at my door and spoken with me for a few minutes, and the neighbors who see me and smile as they nod or wave, and the dregs of society who drift by shouting at their personal demons, whether delusional or genuinely satanic, are all touched by this light?

Do I dare to suppose they are not?

**Prayer:** O God of mercy, who so carest for me as if Thou hadst no other to care for, yet carest for all even as Thou carest for me, I commend to Thee my own needs but also the needs of all this world...

-John Baillie; A Diary of Private Prayer, copyright 1949

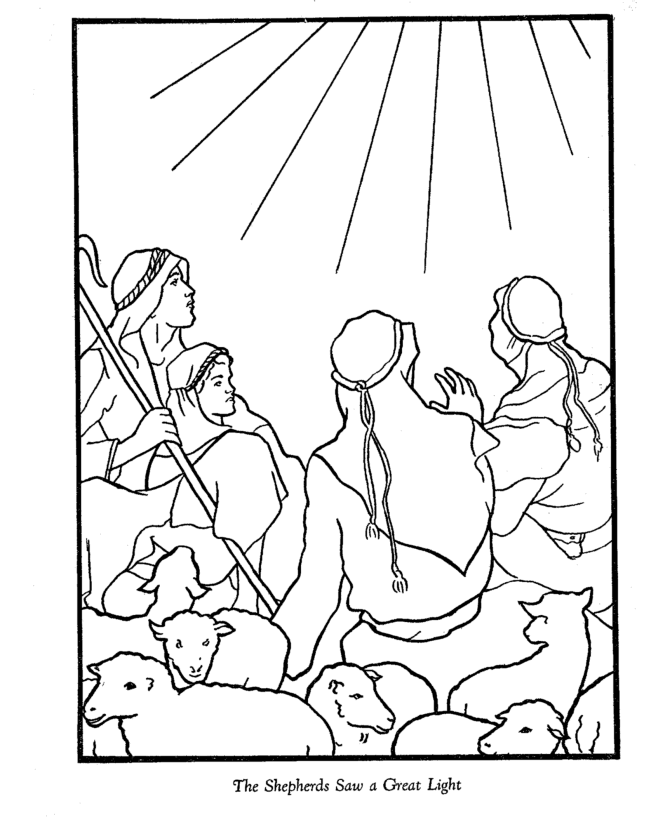
Contributed by Stacy Katczinsky

**December 23 The Third Saturday in Advent**   
**Why Do We Know the Christmas Story?**

**Scripture**: Luke 2: 10 – 11 *And the angel said to them, ‘Be not afraid; for behold I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all of the people; for to you is born in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord.*

**Reflection:** I remember when our children were born, it was the custom to send birth announcements to distant friends and family to let them know of our blessed event. We had spent months preparing for the arrival; buying and knitting clothes, decorating the nursery, doctor visits; all a prelude to taking the baby home.

God sent a birth announcement to the shepherds telling of the birth of His Son, in the form of angels announcing the event and of a star to lead wise men to the child as well. He had also sent John the Baptist to eventually prepare the way through preaching and baptism.

 We prepared for our child; now we must prepare room in our lives for the child of God, Lord Jesus Christ. Each day we need to make room for Christ in our lives through prayer, worship, service and mission.

**Prayer**: Father, as we prepared room for our children, help us to make room for Your Child in our lives. Amen.

Contributed by Don Swanson

**December 24 Christmas Eve  
O Come, O Come, Emmanuel**

**Scripture:** Psalm 30:4 *Sing praise to the LORD, you His godly ones, And give thanks to His holy name.*

**Reflection:** A favorite Advent hymn of mine is “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” I love its minor key. that reflects the realities of the Israelites’ plight, but their hope in the promise of the Savior is dominant in the lyrics.

The Latin text of the lyrics is first documented in Germany in 1710. The tune most familiar to us has its origins in 15th century France. It is an “O antiphon” which is a short chant based on the Psalms used particularly during the last days of Advent. Antiphons are common in Catholic and Lutheran services. We of the Reformed tradition are not as familiar with them—our loss perhaps. But can’t you imagine it echoing through the medieval stone cathedrals as people worship each evening?

The lyrics are pervaded with word pictures using strong verbs (I am an English teacher, after all): “ransom captive Israel/That mourns in lonely exile…”, “free/Thine own from Satan’s tyranny/From depths of hell…”, “Disperse the gloomy clouds of night/And death’s dark shadows put to flight…”. The lyricist understood fully the world.

Each verse (varying by translation) calls the Lord using different names: Lord of Might, Rod of Jesse, Dayspring, Bright and Morning Star, Key of David, Wisdom, King of nations. Our God is Lord of all.

Finally, the refrain tells where we should be in our relationship with God both as the body of Christ and individually: “Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel/ Shall come to thee, O Israel.”

The melody first attracts me, but the words speak of our common humanity and knowledge that God knows all and our common hope in God’s promise of salvation. It is a beautiful expression for Advent.

**Prayer:** Everlasting, Lord, Thank you for the gift of music. The words of this hymn tell our history and express our hope. At the close of 2017, the last verse especially expresses our need: “O Come, desire of nations, bind/ In one the hearts of all mankind/ Bid Thou our sad divisions cease/ And be Thyself our King of Peace.” Amen.

Contributed by Kathy Stockham

**December 25 Christmas**

**Hope in a Child, Victory in a Lord**

**Scripture:** Isaiah 9: 6-7 *For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore.*

Matthew 1: 20-23 *An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”*

**Reflection:** Today we celebrate the greatest gift the world has ever received, a Savior that came into the world as a… baby? Isn’t it incredible that the one who would save humanity from sin and death, would come as such a vulnerable infant? This strong Savior, came as a tiny baby, born into meager circumstances, into a very hostile environment. King Herod sought to kill Him and failed. Herod wasn’t the last to attempt to stop God’s plan for His people.

Throughout His life, others would keep trying to stop Jesus, not realizing that from the very beginning, when Jesus came as a tiny vulnerable human, God’s plan would be that Jesus leave this life as a vulnerable man, hung upon a cross.

God came to this earth, and did so not as a powerful God of all, but as a vulnerable human from birth until his death. He lived as one of us, vulnerable to all sorts of things, so that he could take our place, paying for our sins, once and for all time.

The baby, whose birth we celebrate today, would grow into a man, who lived for 33 years and taught us who God really is, a God who would die to bring us to Him. That man would eventually be tortured, and placed upon a cross to die, all so that he could live again, victorious… no longer a vulnerable human, but a strong, powerful Lord of all creation.

As you celebrate the birth of Jesus today, remember that His life lead not just to the cross, but past the cross, to our eternal salvation through Him. Praise be to God!

**Prayer:** Jesus, on this Christmas morning, thank you for coming to us on earth, to save us. May we seek you in the manger as the shepherds and wise men did. Remembering your weakness as a baby. May we seek you on the cross, as your followers did, remembering your submission to punishment, for us. In all that we do may we seek you as our Lord, the one who reigns supreme in heaven, the one who came for us this Christmas morning. Amen

Contributed by Pastor Jon



**December 26 1st Day of Epiphany**

**The Real Secret**

**Scripture:** Philippians 4:11b-13 *I have learned how to be content with whatever I have.  I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little.  For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength.*

Colossians 1:27 *And this is the secret: Christ lives in you.*

**Reflection:** Over a decade ago, a film was released called *The Secret*, I remember the hype of the film and watching it full of inspiration. I can’t quite remember what it’s about, but Wikipedia says, “It is based on the pseudo-scientific 'law of attraction' which claims that thoughts can change the world directly.”

While there is some truth to the idea that our thoughts can change the world, real change also requires action. I’ve found that believing our thoughts alone can create a perfect reality is sure to result in disappointment. But if we learn the secret Paul discovered, the real secret, about having a deep relationship with Christ, we can face the ups and downs of life from an unwavering core of being.

However, it’s not an easy secret to follow. Knowing it is one thing, but actively living it is a difficult task. It takes discipline and endurance. Thankfully we have God’s help every step of the way. Not just as words on a page, or in our imagination, but in us, giving us strength. The very lifeforce of God flows through believers (every time we celebrate communion we can vividly remember this blessing). In our hardships we turn to Christ who gives us strength, and we realize we will make it through this and be stronger in the end from it.

An example of this secret in action is that I was recently in a car accident. On my way to work a deer suddenly leaped in front of me while I was travelling 60mph. I had little time to react, I slammed on the brakes and smashed dead center into a small deer. I was slightly injured, my car received $5000 or more in damages, and the deer sadly is no more. Years ago, before my strong relationship with Christ, I would have immediately lost my wit and become depressed and angry. But my relationship with the Lord has helped me see the temporariness of it all. My car can be repaired or replaced. My body will heal. My real treasure is in heaven!

But even with a broken body, I think of how rough Paul had it when he coined many of the most beautiful allegiances to God ever penned. Paul had been ridiculed, stoned, lashed, and beaten; both mentally and physically worn down, yet he had God’s peace. Herein lies another side of the secret, we can’t change the world with our thoughts alone, but a relationship with God helps us change how we think of the world.

**Prayer:** Healer God, you put your Spirit in us, so we’d have Your strength. Help us find that power when we stumble and feel weak. Help us back to our feet so that we may show others the firm foundation on which we stand on. Let that power humble us when we waver from You so that by our strong faith others will also want to know The Secret.

Contributed by David McBride

**December 27 2nd Day of Epiphany**

**Christmas Story**

**Scripture:** Luke 2: 7-11 *And she brought forth her first-born 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 to 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*.

**Reflection:** We remember those words from having heard them in Presbyterian Christmas programs past. But those words are perhaps familiar only to the generations that include octogenarians. They are from the King James Bible we received decades ago from a Presbyterian church.

In the current pew Bible of the First Presbyterian Church, “swaddling clothes” have become “bands of cloth.” The shepherds, no longer were “sore afraid.” They were “terrified.” “A Saviour, which is Christ the Lord” is “a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

In the innocence of youth, we did not question the King James wording. If it was in the Bible, it must be OK. In fact, the language had a certain mystique that we came to associate with Christmas.

More jarring than those differences in language is the later structure of these verses: *And the angel said to 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.*

This is the same section from our pew Bible, the New Revised Standard Version: *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.”* Quotation marks and an em dash?

Church today encompasses more changes than those in contrasting Bible versions.

We must accept that each generation tries to do its best.

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father, help us to retain—though the words are different—the joy, comfort and security we experienced in our first hearings of the Christmas story. Amen.

Contributed by Bob Williams

**December 28 3rd Day of Epiphany**

**Being a Mentor**



**Scripture:** Romans 12:6-8 *We all have gifts. They differ in keeping with the grace that God has given each of us. Do you have the gift of prophecy? Then use it in keeping with the faith you have. Is your gift to serve? Then serve. Is it teaching? Then teach. Is it telling others how they should live? Then tell them. Is it giving to those who are in need? Then give freely. Is it being a leader? Then work hard at it. Is it showing mercy? Then do it cheerfully.*

**Reflection:** I had the chance to become a mentor last year, at my job. My first intern was a girl named Shahala, then I had another girl named Ann Marie. This year my job coach from Project Search, Chris, asked me to be a mentor again. But then my boss said that I might have to switch to the dish room. I was very mad because I wasn’t going to be a mentor, and I love helping people with special needs. But it all worked out and I did get to be a mentor again. My newest intern was named Nick.

The first day that I trained Nick He loved doing the condiments. At first, he had a little trouble following directions, but by the end of his rotation he was wiping the tables and doing the soda coolers all by himself. I was so proud of him. His last day was Wednesday; I brought him a card for everybody to sign.

My next intern will be a girl named Beth. I’ve known her forever. She told me, “Guess what, Lily? I get to work with you next rotation!” I was very excited. My old intern, Nick, will be working in the dish room next rotation, so he will be close by.

I love being a mentor so much. I feel really happy when the interns start, and they improve at the end of their rotation. I hope my next intern will get hired and be a real employee. My last year’s interns, Shahala and Ann Marie, are both employees now, one at the hospital where I work and one at a restaurant here in Omaha. I’m glad that God helped the interns to get real jobs.

**Prayer:** Dear God, thank you for the chance to be a mentor. Please make the new interns do a good job at their rotations and help them to get hired as real employees. Amen.

Contributed by Lily Symens

**December 29 4th Day of Epiphany  
Maintaining the Spirit of the Season**



**Scripture:** Matthew 7:7 *Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.*

At no other time of year is the truth of that verse so tangible.

**Reflection:** Every Christmas I can remember, I have asked for things I wanted. If I didn’t volunteer that information (through a letter to Santa Claus or list for Grandma), I was asked to ask. And I have been given what I asked for -- and more.

The search becomes all find and little seek. Holly and ivy, twinkling lights, and angels mark paths to the nearest church.

More than just opened, doors offer light and warmth. They represent refuges from a darkness that descends by midafternoon.

And then it’s over.

The anticipation built between Thanksgiving and Christmas Eve does not dissipate over a month, nor even a week. Its crumpled wrapping paper on the floor of the living room by mid-morning or leftovers taken as lunch when returning to work on December 26. My mom keeps her Christmas decorations up through New Year. I appreciate this bulwark -- albeit temporary -- against the invasion of normalcy.

**Prayer:** Help me to recognize that I control the return to normalcy, maintaining the hope of the holidays until next Christmas.

Contributed by Josh Nichol-Caddy

**December 30 5th Day of Epiphany   
Faith**

**Scripture:** Matthew 17: 20 He *replied, Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, Move from here to there and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.*

**Reflection:** The definition of faith, and there are many, is a belief in God or in the doctrines or teachings of religion. I have always believed in God. I remember as a little girl that my mother would pray with me before I went to bed. This was a part of our evening “ritual.” The prayer that was said was “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” Here I was as a child, with my parents teaching me to put my faith into God.

This has been a difficult second half of the year for me. As many of you know, I broke my ankle again. Yes again. Back in 2000 I broke both my ankles and had surgery on the left one. At that time, we had an associate pastor Paul Fischer, and he spoke about “God Things.” This was a God thing as God wanted me home to be with my mom as my dad’s health was deteriorating and in the hospital most of the time. She needed care, and even though I needed care, we helped one another. In 2007 I had another ankle break – the left one again and it was above the previous plate that was in there. Another God thing as it was getting to be retirement time, and could I stay home during the winter and not get bored. With another ankle surgery, I put my faith in God to get me through this. He did. Now comes September 6, 2017, and another ankle break. I couldn’t believe it. Pastor Jon prayed for patience for me four times. He knew I needed a big dose of patience, and I needed to understand WHY another ankle break. I’m not clumsy or klutzy, and to just turn your foot and break your ankle!!!! I needed to figure out the God thing again and my faith was pretty thin at this time. I finally figured out the God thing with the help of some good friends – SLOW DOWN! I gave up being head wedding coordinator, which I really enjoyed doing, and received many compliments and thank you’s from parents. I also gave up being the photographer at church events. Don’t worry; you won’t see me taking that many pictures anymore! I had to get off my feet and not do so much and spend more time with Nicky, my dog, I can’t put 71/2 miles on my feet running around the church during a wedding.

It is through God’s faith that has gotten me through all of this. This is also the time to celebrate the birth of Jesus, and as He walked among His believers, they had faith in His teachings many years ago as He does today. Yes, I said thank you Jesus many times. Trust me, the nights at Old Mill Rehab were long, and you had plenty of time to pray and just talk to our Almighty. Thanks be to God for the faith that He gives us and also to Jesus as He suffered much more than we have.

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, thank you for teaching us to love You and to have faith in You. You guide us daily, doing what You want us to do. Guide us this Christmas season to celebrate the reason for Christmas – the birth of Your son. We ask this in Your name, Amen.

Contributed by Joyce Prohaska



**December 31 6th Day of Epiphany**  
**It Was Never Between You and Them**  
  
**Scripture:** Matthew 5:11-16*Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you….Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven*.

At a family friend’s house, this framed verse hangs on the bathroom wall, and I always like to make a point to stop and read it:

*They may see the good you do as self-serving.*

*Continue to do good.*

*They may see your generosity as grandstanding.*

*Continue to be generous.*

*They may see your warm and caring nature as a weakness.*

*Continue to be warm and caring.*

*For you see, in the end, it is between you and God.*

*It was never between you and them anyway.*

*-Author unknown*

**Reflection:** I think I like this verse so much because it serves as a reassurance that it’s always right to treat everyone with kindness, generosity and warmth whether or not other people are reacting the same way. It basically says that it might be more comfortable to follow the crowd, but the crowd may not always embody the values we know to be the most important.

During the Christmas season, reminders to be generous and kind are all around us. All kinds of donation drives and campaigns are underway during November and December, and it’s easy for us to proclaim Christian values when everyone else in our community is decking the halls and singing Christmas carols.

After Christmas, though, that warm, fuzzy spirit inevitably fades away. It once again becomes normal to retreat back into our own lives, and going out of our way to help others becomes unpopular and burdensome. In those times, I appreciate seeing that verse on the wall. It reminds me that, even when society tells us our actions are unnecessary, self-serving, showy or weak, caring for others is always the right choice. Just think of what could happen if we continued to treat one another like it was Christmastime throughout the rest of the year!

**Prayer:** Lord, help us to remember that your judgment is the only judgment that matters. During the Christmas season and throughout the rest of the year, help us always choose to be kind, generous and caring, even when that choice separates us from societal norms. Help us to keep the spirit of Christmas in our hearts as we interact with others this year. Amen.

Contributed by September Symens

**January 1 7th Day of Epiphany  
The Power of Babies**



**Scripture:** Psalm 8: 2 *Through the praise of children and infants you have established a stronghold against your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger.*

### Isaiah 54:13 *All your children shall be taught by the Lord, and great shall be the peace of your children.*

### Proverbs 17:6 Grandchildren *are the crown of the aged, and the glory of children is their fathers.*

Luke 2:16 *And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.*

Matthew 18:10 *See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven*.

Mark 10:14-16 *When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.**Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.*

**Reflection:** It might seem that these are a lot of scripture quotes for one devotion, but they illustrate the point of this reflection. It is clear that God values babies. He sent his only son as a baby and that baby, Jesus, taught that babies and children were to be included in life and worship. Babies are tiny creatures with amazing powers. Technically, they are helpless and can do nothing without assistance from other humans. However, in our times, they quickly develop the power to evoke feelings and actions of tenderness and caring toward them from their families and almost anyone who encounters them. I started thinking about this power of babies one afternoon late this summer when I was sitting in my front yard rocking my baby granddaughter. I had moved to my current home three years before and had never met my next-door neighbors to the south. They are not outside much and had never spoken to me. That day, the woman got out of her car to go into the house and called over to me from a fairly long distance, “that is sure a pretty baby you have there.” I said she was my granddaughter, and the woman told me that she wished she had one of those. After that, the three people who live in that house started to speak to me when they saw me. A few weeks ago, it happened again. A neighbor across the street, whom I did not even realize lived there, saw me in the yard with my granddaughter and introduced herself by asking about the baby. We had a lovely conversation. I might never have met these people if it had not been for the baby. When I take walks in places such as Lauritzen Gardens or Fontenelle Forest, people I encounter will usually say a quick hello and move on. However, if I am walking with the baby, they stop to talk to me and to her. I have met some interesting people because of this phenomenon.

These and other such experiences made me think about why God sent Jesus as a baby. Obviously, God had a plan. His son was to be fully human and to go through the stages of development of all humans, but he was also sent to be an example to us and to model the behaviors and attitudes that God wants for all of humanity to exhibit. In ancient times, children were not considered to have value until they were old enough to work and act as adults. The disciples tried to keep children away from Jesus. Jesus changed all of that forever. He told the disciples to let the children come to him. He wanted children to have at least as much attention and respect as adults. Because of His teaching, today we take for granted that the innocence and helplessness of children makes them particularly valuable, and in need of special care. We enjoy and encourage their happiness and their energy. We allow ourselves to express tender feelings whenever we look at baby pictures.

Writer/blogger, Mary Lauren Weimer, writes, “My theory is that babies have magical powers. They may not be able to leap tall buildings in a single bound or stop time in its tracks, but there’s no doubt about it: They’re experts at casting spells of love.” Spells of love. What a brilliant phrase. God sent his son, Jesus, to make us understand that every single human being is a beloved child of God, who is capable of receiving and giving love.

**Prayer:** Lord, we praise and thank you for the precious lives of all babies and young children, knowing that each one is special to you and that you have plans for them to spread spells of love to all. Give everyone the wisdom and grace to care for them as Jesus did. Give us the love of the shepherds who left their fields to worship the infant king and that of the wise men who risked everything to travel a long way to see your baby, Jesus. Thank you for sending your Son to be the light of the world and to spread his light of love to all. Amen

Contributed by Merryellen Towey Schulz

**January 2 8th Day of Epiphany  
Traveling on Faith**

**Scripture:** Proverbs 3: 5-6 *Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.*

*In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.*

Hebrews 11: 1 *Faith is the hope of things not yet seen.*

**Reflection:** Steve and I moved this fall from our house with a zillion stairs in Omaha’s midtown to a ranch-style house ‘way out west near 168th street. We are in the process of adjusting to a much longer work commute and have tried various routes to find the fastest.

One good route home is taking Center Street west. This involves an exit from southbound 72nd Street onto Center to head west. I say ‘exit from’ because this intersection is not a corner but rather has a long, curved ramp that runs alongside a circular ramp for traffic to turn south onto 72nd from Center Street.

It was rush hour when I first tried this route. Driving up the ramp toward Center I noticed with alarm that the cars circling down to 72nd appeared to be driving on my ramp. It looked to me like we were on a collision course. How interesting that neither those drivers nor I slammed on our brakes! But as you’ve guessed, after just a second or two their road next to mine came into view and we passed by each other without incident.

I’ve enjoyed this optical illusion many times since. I drive on, confident I am safe and sound, even though it sure doesn’t look like it.

Isn’t that faith? Confidence to keep moving forward even when God’s plans are not yet revealed. A baby in a manger? Hope for the Messiah not yet seen.

**Reflection:** *Oh Lord, please help me go in faith where you lead, in confidence and without fear, despite what it looks like from here. Amen*

Contributed by Amy Rodie

**January 3 9th Day of Epiphany  
3 Verses; 3 Songs About Christmas**

**Reflection:** Although I am unable to read a single note of music, and am unable to hold the simplest tune, I do love music. That includes Christmas music. I’m not one of those wack-a-doodle persons who start listening to Christmas music at the end of September (believe me, they do exist - I know a few), but music is one of the things I like about best about the Christmas season. There are particular versions of songs that really move me to reflect on the meaning of Christmas. Quite often they are not even “religious” or “sacred” songs or hymns, but for one reason or another, they speak to me of God’s love for us - even when we are not always lovable creatures.

Mark 2: 13-17 *He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them. And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he rose and followed him. And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners*.”

The song “Fairytale of New York” by the Pogues is far from your typical Christmas tune - the first line being “It was Christmas Eve babe, in the drunk tank”. It makes my list of favorite Christmas songs not because it has soaring lyrics about how wonderful the Christmas season is, but because it is a tale of the down and out, the disillusioned, those who have lost dreams. The Pogues, being an Irish punk band from the 80’s wouldn’t appeal to everyone, but the lyrics in this song always make me reflect on the purpose of Jesus’s ministry; not to minister to the likable, the worthy, the socially acceptable, but to those who we are inclined to shun or ignore. Mark talks about the Jesus’s intent in blunt terms: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Ephesians 6: 10 *Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.*

Another of my favorite Christmas songs “I heard the bells on Christmas Day” is a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. This poem was written after Longfellow’s second wife died, and his son joined the army against his wishes. The last stanzas inspire me whenever I hear them, whether put to music or read. They speak to me of the power God; that he is in control, even when it feels like the world is becoming encased in a shell of chaos:

And in despair I bowed my head;

"There is no peace on earth," I said;

"For hate is strong,

And mocks the song

Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:

"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;

The Wrong shall fail,

The Right prevail,

With peace on earth, good-will to men."

John 4:10 *This is what love is: it is not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the means by which our sins are forgiven*.

People old enough to remember record albums, may remember the yearly Firestone Christmas album that was put out several years in a row. Growing up, we had five or six of these, and one of my all-time favorite Christmas songs is “What Child is This” sung by the “New Christi Minstrels”. Set to simple guitar strumming, the version included lyrics seldom sung, the usual refrain being different for each verse. I remember as a child feeling a heart ache whenever I heard the lyrics: “Nails, spears, shall pierce him through, the cross he bore for me for you. Hail, Hail the word made flesh. The Babe, the son of Mary”. I have yet to hear any other lyrics express more perfectly the love of God for his children.

**Prayer**: God, let the music we hear this Christmas season speak to us of your boundless love. Let our response be a reflection of your love to the world. Amen

Contributed by Karen Kroupa

**January 4 10th Day of Epiphany  
Marriage: God’s Work**

**Scripture:** Genesis 2: 24 For *this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh*.

**Reflection**: I am still a newlywed. Mike and I found each other later in life so we cherish the time we have together much more than If we were younger. The most important aspect of our marriage is our commitment to each other and how that is essential to a successful marriage. (Genesis 24: 58-60).

Marriage is based on the principled practice of love, not on feelings (Ephesians 5:21-33).  
 Love is an action. Marriage holds time of great joy (Jeremiah 33: 10-11).   
 Marriage is also a living symbol of Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5: 23, 32).  
 Marriage is God’s idea (Genesis 2: 18-24) and marriage is permanent. (Matthew 19:6).   
 Marriage is good and honorable (Hebrews 13: 4).   
 Romance is important (Song of Songs 4: 9-10).   
 Unfaithfulness breaks the bonds of trust, the foundation of all relationships (Matthew 5:32).

The Bible has all this and more to say about marriage. Deuteronomy 24:5 talks about newlyweds needing a strong start in marriage. Mike and I didn’t have a strong start during our engagement. We were experiencing some pretty difficult growing pains.

We both knew we loved each other, but was that going to be enough? During our premarital counseling session Mike asked Pastor Jon if he thought we were getting married too soon. Pastor Jon responded honestly: He didn’t know.

One of our common strengths is our faith and our reliance on God. So, we changed the dynamics of our relationship. I started reading the Bible more; mostly on marriage and using early morning time to pray. Mike’s big change was his direct communication with God. He simply asked God to change him.

Fast-forward to August 5, 2017. Mike and I were married, as many of you know. Pastor Jon read from Ephesians, our favorite book of the Bible. The most important thing, he said, was to submit to each other. We have done just that. Oh, it hasn’t always been easy, and we still have occasional problems. However, we are committed to our marriage and honoring God’s words about marriage.

**Prayer**:  God, during this coming year, please bless all the married couples in our congregation.  Please give an abundance of joy and happiness and love. Help us all to be like Priscilla and Aquila with their devotion to you God, and what can happen through husband and wife. Amen

Contributed by Leanne Malecha White

**January 5 11th Day of Epiphany**

**Scripture:** Jeremiah 23:23 *Am I, think ye, a God at hand, saith the Lord, and not a God afar off?"*

**Reflection:** "You're thinking of this place all wrong. As if I had the money back in a safe. The money's not here. Your money's in Joe's house, right next to yours. And in the Kennedy house, and Mrs. Macklin's house, and a hundred others." -George Bailey, of *It's a Wonderful Life*, restoring his community's faith during a crisis.

As a child raised in an Assembly of God church, I was encouraged to look down on those pitiably misinformed Catholics, who kept Jesus in two places: one of them the cross, where he remained nailed like dead weight, and the other a locked brass box, from which a priest gave them a mouthful every Sunday before sending them back into the world.

Since then, I've been through several denominations, and I've noticed that in every one of them, there are people who come to church on Sunday to get an earful, rather than a mouthful, and for whom Jesus is not only absent from the cross, but from the rest of their week as well.

For some, it's a comforting routine, and for others it's fire insurance, but either way, they're thinking of this place all wrong. While there is and always should be comfort here, and the assurance of Christ's love, the church is, in reality, a mess tent, where Christian soldiers find nourishment. The church is, in reality, a field hospital, where the wounded, whether saints or sinners, come for healing. And while God's grace is the safest thing you could know, it isn't hoarded inside these walls; it's poured out in the house right next to yours and a hundred others.

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, we trust in your love, which dries our tears and comforts us. Give us the courage to bring your message of hope to everyone, that we may feel your loving presence as we look upon the faces of our neighbors.

Contributed by Stacy Katczinsky

**January 6 Epiphany  
What’s in a Name?**

**Scripture:** Isaiah 11:1*Out of the stump of David’s family will grow a shoot— yes, a new Branch bearing fruit from the old root.*

Jeremiah 33:14-15*The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land***.**

**Reflection:** I recently read the book *God Has a Name*, by John Mark Comer. It’s a very good book; so good that I read it twice and still want to read it again!  The whole book is based on Exodus 34:5-7, where God introduces Himself as “Yahweh! The Lord! The God of compassion and mercy!”, the God who is “slow to anger and filled with unfailing love and faithfulness”.  
 Today when we use the word God outside of the Church (and maybe even in the church) we may not be talking about the same thing, but it is important for us to clarify just who the God we worship is, and why. This book is a good start on being able to understand who our God is.

The verses from Isaiah and Jeremiah prophesied the coming of this God into our very presence, God in the flesh, God with Us, Emmanuel, the one we call Jesus, or Yehoshua in Hebrew--which means the Lord is salvation.

It’s amazing what you find once you scratch the surface. And I have a lot of scratching yet to do.

A part of the quest that got me to this point was to understand better the faith my ancestors revered so much that they felt compelled to name the children of my generation with very Biblical names. My sister Anne (Anna) Elizabeth, my brother Thomas Asher, and me David Branch.  All names that point to Jesus. It’s as if God knew we would each fall away from Him so He gave us names that would point us back to Him. It’s a bit crazy to believe, but when Jesus’ disciples asked Him who could be saved, he gave a profound answer “Humanly speaking, it is impossible. But with God everything is possible.” [Matt 19:26]

My life brings out the truth in this saying because just three years ago, the last thing on my mind was becoming a follower of Christ. Even when I entered the doors of the church I had no intention of entering a relationship with God. But God, in His power and might was working His plan which is much higher than mine. That my own name would lead me to the magnificence of His name!

**Prayer:** Dear God in Whom all things are possible, continue to draw us closer to you so that we may know and share you in all Your glory. Help us see, even in the most trying times, that your ways our higher than we will ever know. Give us hope, that in Your time, even the most lost, will be drawn back into your love.

“My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts,” says the Lord.

“And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine.

For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts. [Isaiah 55:8-9]

Contributed by David McBride