

Advent 2017 at St. John's UMC

Advent Festival

Sunday December 3 at 4 p.m.

Lessons & Carols

Sunday December 10 at 8:30 & 11 a.m.

Annual Great Turkey Giveaway

Saturday December 16 at 9 a.m.

The Longest Night

Thursday, December 21 at 6 p.m.

Christmas Eve Services

Sunday December 24

One worship service at 10 a.m.

Family service at 4 p.m.

Traditional service at 7 p.m.



ST. JOHN'S

United Methodist Church

Glorifying God. Feeding People. Making Disciples.

St. John's United Methodist Church
230 Renee Drive | Baton Rouge, LA 70810
Join us for Sunday worship at 8:30 and 11 a.m.
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Advent Devotional 2017

Written by Members of
St. John's United Methodist Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

Welcome Christmas Day

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made...The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. —John 1:1,2,14 NIV

One Christmas, I traveled to Dallas to meet with friends who were celebrating a “Friendsmas.” At this gathering were seminarians and a homeless man they had befriended. He asked for a shower, and received toiletries and clean clothes to wear while his clothes were washed! At dinner, with tears in his eyes he said, “Wow, I feel like a new man and I am so thankful for what y’all just did for me. You have no idea how much this means.” I was overwhelmed to see that actions done out of love and compassion were received with such humility. This was truly a welcoming moment; though none of us knew how the night would go, God’s Holy Spirit was very present throughout the evening.

As I reflect on this John text it speaks of how the word of God became human flesh, through Christ Jesus. Christmas is a joyful time, a time when we celebrate that word being made flesh with the birth of a child so small and humble. It’s that sense of humility that makes me think of our neighbors in The Shepherd’s Market who come humbly to receive. Many come who are physically hungry but they come spiritually hungry as well. What do our neighbors see in the faces and actions of The Shepherd’s Market volunteers who are serving them? Like that humble birth so long ago, God’s presence continues to find us in the ordinary places of our lives; time spent with loved ones and in acts of compassion and care to our neighbors.

Oh Holy one, Holy three, we celebrate the birth of your son today. We celebrate how his entrance into the world made your presence become flesh incarnate. May we continue to celebrate how you walk with us, and are there present in the spaces of our lives before we ever are. Amen.

Pastor Julia Puac-Romero

Foreward Advent 2017

Welcome Inn:

The best surprises are those that come to us unexpectedly. Advent is such a time of unexpected surprise and the place in which I pray we all will discover God’s welcome, hope and amazing love. Longing is woven into Isaiah’s words when he proclaims “Shout for joy, you heavens; rejoice you earth; burst into song you mountains! For the Lord comforts his people, and He will have compassion on the afflicted ones” (49:13). We become the Advent hope in the ways in which we offer compassion and comfort to those who are afflicted. Like Mary and Joseph, we rejoice in the unexpected kindness of those who offer a place of shelter, rest and welcome. I pray that the words of this Advent devotional will touch your heart as you continue to open doors of welcome to your family, church and community.

My heart is grateful to all who have willingly shared their time and writing talents for this Advent devotional. These words come from teachers, lawyers and nurses; spouses, widows/widowers and parents. They are small glimpses into lives that are imperfect and broken, yet redeemed by faith in the welcome we have all felt. A special thanks to Mari Walker for her long hours of dedication that helped birth this small publication and her willingness to humor me with “trying” this one more change. My sincere gratitude is extended to Dr. Betty Schroeder and Mary Martha Allen for their invaluable editing skills. May the Welcome of this Advent season be for you a place of hope and new beginnings.

In His service,
Deirdré Halliburton
Director of Discipleship and Connection

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Week 1

Welcome Divine Promise

Read: Isaiah 2:1-5

Light: *We offer the following reading as you light the first candle on your Advent wreath. If you do not have an Advent wreath, we invite you to light a candle, reminding you of the coming Christ Child, the Hope of the world.*

This is the first Sunday in Advent, and today we light the candle of Hope. Advent is a time of waiting and hoping. We wait for the day when we celebrate again the birth of Jesus. We hope that everyone will come to know God and to worship God.

(Light the first candle)

When we look at the first candle we remember God's divine promise. God promised to send a Savior to the people. Our scripture from Isaiah reminds us that God fulfills the promises made to care for us. God is loving and just. God brings peace. This gives us hope. We look forward to the time when everything is fair, when the world is at peace and all people are treated justly.

Reflect: This Scripture offers us the hope of God's kingdom where there is peace and has the wonderful sentence, "...let us walk in the light of the Lord!" Who are the people in our world who need hope? What are the hopes you have for our world today? How do we help others know that God gives hope?

Pray: Eternal God, Thank you for the words of the Prophet Isaiah that remind us that you are the source of our hope. Help us to remember to walk in the light of the Lord. Amen.

Respond: Is there someone you know who needs to hear words of hope? Make or select a card for that person and mail it today.

* Adapted from UMC Discipleship Ministries 2017 Advent Home Worship

Welcome Christmas Eve

So welcome each other, in the same way that Christ also welcomed you, for God's glory. Romans 15:7 (CEB)

During one of Kaye's final "alert days," I took communion over to her house. I knew this visit would be one of our last. It was a sacred time—shared in a sacred place—her home.

As she slowly walked me out, I noticed her nativity set, complete with 12-inch tall figurines, set up by the front door on its own table. It seemed a little unusual because it was the middle of the summer!

I commented to her how beautiful it was. She said Christmas was her favorite holiday so she liked to keep it all year. As I turned to say goodbye, she said, "I want to make sure every day I've got left feels like Christmas."

As I stood in the doorway where Kaye and her husband, James, welcome people into their home—I was reminded of the fullness of life—the goodness of God's great love for us—that we experience in the Christ child. Yes, it's Christmas everyday when we experience the miracle of birth alongside the mystery of death with dear loved ones in our lives.

It's Christmas every day when we, like...

- Joseph, willingly accept the challenges that life poses.
- Mary, say, "Let it be. Let it be according to Your will, O God."
- the angels, bring good news of God's love to the world.
- the innkeeper, offer welcome to our neighbors.
- the shepherds, share the love we experience at the manger with everyone we meet.
- the wise men, bow before God bringing these gifts to the Prince of Peace—offering our best—our lives—in his service.

May Hope, Peace, Joy and Love abound in your hearts and lives, as together we experience the Living Christ, not only this day, but each day, forevermore.

Emmanuel, God with us, we celebrate your presence this day. Open our eyes to your miracles each day. Thank you for accepting and welcoming us. Amen.

Pastor Lane Cotton Winn

Christmas Eve/Christmas Day Lighting the Christ Candle

Read: John 1:1-5

Light: We offer the following reading as you light the four Advent candles and Christ Candle on your Advent wreath. If you do not have an Advent wreath, we invite you to light a candle, in honor of the Christ Child that is born again in our hearts and lives this Christmas.

The day has finally come! As we celebrate the birth of Jesus, we light the Christ candle, signifying the Light of Christ has come into the world. The candles of Hope, Peace, Joy and Love are lit, too. In lighting these candles, we remember Jesus' presence with us now—Emmanuel—God is with us.

(Light the first, second, third, and fourth candles. Light the center white candle.)

Reflect: When we look at the center candle, we remember that God sent Jesus to give hope, peace, joy and love to all people. Outside of Bethlehem, the shepherds saw a great light and heard the voices of angels. They traveled to the manger and were welcomed in as the first guests to see the baby Jesus.

Far away from Bethlehem, magi saw a star in the sky. They followed the star and were filled with joy when they found Jesus. They remind us that the gift of Jesus was not just for the people in one place but for all people. All are welcome to worship the newborn king and to follow in his pathway of light.

It's amazing to think of these persistent travelers who were determined to find Jesus. They traveled with hope and faith in the promise that they would find the new king. Who are the people in our world who need to know of God's promises?

What are our hopes on this day for our world?

Pray: Dear God, Thank you for your son, Jesus and the welcome you extend to all people and places. This Christmas, help us remember and rejoice again because Jesus was born. May we live every day remembering your loving care and warm welcome and showing that loving care and welcome to others. Amen.

Respond: Name one thing you are willing to do in the days following Christmas that will help you and others remember God's promises.

** Adapted from UMC Discipleship Ministries 2017 Advent Home Worship*

Welcoming a New Thing

Remember not the former things nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing, now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. —Isaiah 43: 18-19

When Jesus came on the scene, He rocked the world and humanity with His newness. The former things and old things were done. All the people believed about a relationship with God and the law and how it made them right vanished in the wind. This baby in a smelly stable, born to a teenage virgin, from the wrong side of the tracks is the Savior of the world? No one at the time saw this coming, and we still cannot wrap our minds around the humble, scandalous state in which our Savior was born.

There is nothing easy about birthing something. If we contemplate our walk with Jesus, we can see how He takes us through the birthing process continually in life. He is birthing us to be what He has in mind. I think that He wants new things for us even though we long for the days of old, people to come back into our lives, and to have things be comfortable and easy.

My family is new to St. John's United Methodist Church, and there were many transitions before we became members. If we will let God take control and help us in this current birthing process of change, we, the community, and world will be blessed beyond compare. This new "baby" will not look like what we think it should look like, act like we think it should or sound like we think, but how beautiful this can be if we allow the changes to happen and open our hearts to God.

Father, please help us to remember that You are a God of birth and change. You do not allow us to stay the same and are always transforming us into who You want us to be. As St. John's continues to go through changes, please help us to lean in to what You are doing to grow us into the "Body of Christ" that impacts the community and world for Your glory, honor and praise. We thank You, Jesus, for coming in such a humble way to a broken people in need of redemption. Let us contemplate Your birth, Jesus, and continue to show us how You have turned the world upside down because of Your love for humanity. May we live lives that honor and bear Your image. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Shay Chauvin

Let It Be

Nothing is impossible with God. Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”—Luke 1:37-38

I hear a voice from another generation singing familiar words,

*“When I find myself in times of trouble,
Mother Mary comes to me,
Speaking words of wisdom: Let it Be, Let it Be.”*

The words haunt me, even as I read Scripture. They bounce around in my head and pictures begin to form. Once the timing of her child’s birth may have seemed off to Mary—not even married yet, now she senses something more. And the pregnancy of her much older cousin, Elizabeth, which at first seemed only a coincidence, now can be seen differently. The voice and the music go on,

*“And in my hours of darkness
She is standing right in front of me,
Whispering words of wisdom: Let It Be.”*

They were learning one of the deep truths of People of Faith, first taught by Old Testament prophets: You cannot change the past, but you CAN change the MEANING of the past. We walk by faith and not by sight.

*“When the night is cloudy, there is still
A light that shines on me,
Shines until tomorrow: Let it Be.”*

Faith teaches me I can know more tomorrow than I know today. Let’s return to the words and music dancing around in my head:

*“I wake up to the sound of music,
Mother Mary comes to me,
Singing words of wisdom: Let it Be.”*

That is why God comes to us in human form in Jesus Christ: to make sure we know that we can trust the One who gives us Life. Let it be.

O my God, Take my life and let it be... Amen.

John Winn

California Christmas

“For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” —Matthew 18:20

Our traditional family Christmas was not to be that year! Even grown children have expectations that their parents will keep the home fires burning and maintain traditions, don’t they? My stable parents had shocked the family by moving from our small Southern hometown to Orange, California. A few months after the big move, my husband, our two small children and I accepted the invitation to spend Christmas in California.

In our hometown, we had always attended the Christmas Eve candlelight service in the lovely old Methodist church. Although my parents had not yet found a California church home, my mom was determined we would all be in church on Christmas Eve. Soon, we were piled into the car, Dad driving and Mom directing. Stops at a couple of churches proved unfruitful, either no service or a midnight service. Grumbling began from the back seat with, “Shouldn’t we go back home?” Mom insisted we forge ahead!

It was getting dark when we happened upon a Lutheran church. We got out and followed a crowd into a big basketball gym with rows of folding metal chairs. The crowd grew quiet when a striking woman with a familiar face stood and began to belt out a carol. In a moment of insight, we recognized her as a soap opera star! The next soloist was a small boy singing “Away in a Manger” a bit off key and an octave too high. At this point, my composure snapped, and I began to giggle uncontrollably, but silently. Fortunately, my undignified behavior was witnessed only by my family. All in all, the service was lovely, and we were invited back by many kind folks. Our California Christmas reminded us that the welcoming spirit of Christmas is not dependent on tradition or place, but on Christ’s presence evident in a community of believers.

Dear Lord, please give us open minds and hearts to know your presence in all places and situations. Amen.

Mary Martha Allen

The Christmas Rose

Where is he who is born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him. —Matthew 2:2

For 11-year-old Caroline and her younger brother Tom the days before Christmas seemed to be lasting forever. One afternoon while they were watching television, Dad brought them a surprise. It was an ordinary looking little plant in a small clay pot.

“It’s a Christmas rose,” he said. “There’s a legend about it. Long ago, when Jesus was born in Bethlehem, many people brought him gifts. One little girl wanted to give a gift to the baby, too, but her family was so poor she had nothing to take. She was so sad she began to cry. Where her tears fell on the ground, a plant grew up and on the plant a beautiful white flower bloomed. This plant became the girl’s gift to the Christ Child, and its flower was the first Christmas rose. If you two take good care of this plant, I think it will bloom by Christmas morning.”

Tom and Caroline agreed to watch over the Christmas rose. At first things did not go well. It was difficult for the two to work together. But as the plant grew and put out new leaves, the children became more and more interested in caring for it.

At last it was Christmas Eve. The plant had almost doubled in size and a bud had appeared at the tip of a stem. Tom and Caroline were excited. They determined to stay up through the night and watch the bud open. More than once they almost drifted to sleep. Not long before dawn, the bud opened. The children saw a beautiful Christmas rose.

Later that morning in church, Caroline and Tom placed the rose on the altar. It was their gift to welcome the newborn Christ Child.

Lord, help us to open our hearts and welcome you in once again. Teach us your ways.

Guy Johnson

Welcome Being Known

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put= my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. —Jeremiah 31:31-34 (NRSV)

What does it mean to “know the LORD”? I confess that I often struggle to know my own self. Following the example of Adam and Eve, I clothe myself with accomplishment, skill or useful service. I have even donned the filthy rags of flawed adherence to a moral code or to correct belief. Ashamed of my naked self, I hide.

In Concluding Unscientific Postscript, Kierkegaard asked this question:

“On which side is there the most truth? The side of the one who seeks the true God objectively and pursues the approximate truth of the God-idea; or on the side of one who, driven by the infinite passion of his need of God, feels infinite concern for his own relationship to God in truth?”

Or consider the hymn “Come, Ye Sinners Poor and Needy:”

*“Let not conscience let you linger,
Nor of fitness fondly dream;
All the fitness he requireth
Is to feel your need of him.”*

In this time of Advent preparation, I will find joy in worshiping at St. John’s with you who inspire me with your faith and good works. May this help me look within myself for those places where the LORD is known—where we welcome each other in.

Heavenly Father, I pray for grace to be in more honest relationship with self and you. Amen.

Ray Halliburton

The Cardinals of Winter

Be still and know that I am God. —Psalm 46:10

The winter cardinals are back. Every November they begin arriving to settle into the protective comfort of the tall thick shrubs at the back of my yard. They number about 25. I encourage their winter-long visit with two constantly dripping birdbaths and multiple feeders overflowing with sunflower seed. They return the favor simply by being themselves.

The days are busy with singing and foraging and competition with the red-winged blackbirds that meander through in groups from time to time. But the magic of the winter cardinals happens late in the afternoons, near dusk, when all the other interlopers have given up and flown off to some distant roost. The cardinals in their resplendently red garb flit about the baths and feeders in an unscripted dance, moving in profound silence that is nothing short of sacred.

This time and place of beauty and silence at the end of each day becomes a holy ground, an introit into prayerful listening and contemplation. God's presence is palpable in the dimming light as the birds silently wing their way to their resting place and leave my expectant heart waiting in the stillness for the mystery and blessing of the season.

God of all creation, help us to relinquish our busy-ness in this wondrous season of waiting. Enable us to be attentive to the movement of Spirit and to feel your all-abiding presence in every facet of our lives. Amen.

Betty Schroeder

Welcome Home

*While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.
—Luke 2:6-7*

Can you imagine how Mary felt when baby Jesus was laid in her arms on that cold lonely night?

Thirty-two years ago a baby was put into my arms. After years of trying to start a family followed by several years of missteps in the adoption process, my husband and I were finally going to receive a baby. We were overwhelmed with gratitude that our fervent and constant prayers were being answered. We were also terrified, as most new parents must be, at the magnitude of the responsibility we were taking on.

We had waited years. Then we had waited three days since the baby's birth. Now we found ourselves waiting endless hours to actually receive our baby boy. Those hours crawled by, filled in turn with anxiety, excitement and fear.

Finally Ms. Georgia was there, carrying a little blanket-wrapped bundle. I couldn't believe it was happening. She placed the baby in my arms and I felt the blessings of God's holy universe descend on me. A warmth enveloped the top of my head and slowly flowed down my torso to my toes. It felt like every atom in my body was vibrating with an indescribable love.

For Mary, an angel promised a baby boy, the son of God. Surely through the months of waiting Mary felt anxiety. Holding that little cloth-wrapped infant for the first time must have been profoundly overwhelming. Just imagine the divine love that enveloped her at that moment!

And the angels sang!

God of unfathomable love, prepare our hearts in this season of Advent to welcome once again the birth of the Christ Child. Open us to the mystery of Emmanuel, God With Us, so that we can feel your all-abiding presence in every facet of our lives. Amen.

Betty Schroeder

The Perfect Christmas Gift

They saw Mary, his mother, and fell down and worshiped him; and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts: gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. —Matthew 2:11

When Goudchaux fashioned a window display for Christmas 1957, my father took us to see Santa Claus. This Santa Claus patted his knee and belly laughed. His laughter was infectious. Mr. Bingle, the Goudchaux snowman and several of Santa's elves displayed all the children's favorite toys—new buxom Barbies, Ken, Tonka trucks, Hula hoops, pogo sticks, baby dolls, tea sets, chemistry sets, a peg pounding tablet, a nurse's kit, basketballs, tennis rackets, baseball bats, western hats and gun holsters, Howdie Doodie dolls.

My father had a mission in taking us to see the window display. As with every good father, he aspired to find just the right Christmas present that would please each child. In post-World War II, he went to LSU on the GI Bill and became a lawyer. After the first hard years of eating potato soup and paying off a huge medical bill, he finally had money to spend on Christmas and this would be the BEST CHRISTMAS ever. It would make up for all those hard times. Poverty was an old friend. He remembered his letter to his father, written when he was in a Catholic orphanage in North Carolina in 1929. He dearly wanted a Bible. Could his father in Louisiana send him a Bible? But Grandpa Austin had a new family and new children. Cameron, La., was a harsh place to raise cattle and a family. There would be no Bible that year.

When Christmas 1957 came, my twin sister Sharon and I received our chemistry sets, nurses kits and Barbie dolls. Martha got tea sets, baby dolls and doll clothes. Junior got Tonka trucks and a cowboy hat with vest, gun and holster. We were all thrilled with our gifts. But most special of all: on the table there were Bibles inscribed to each of us from our father. I did not know then how much the Bibles meant to Daddy. It was after he and Mama died that I found that letter to Grandpa Austin. And I will cherish the gift of the Bible and the gift of his love of Jesus.

What special gift will you give this year?

Father, Thank you for all the gifts you have given to us: especially the gift of your son, Jesus, born during this Christmas season. We are so grateful for our time, talents, compassion and necessities. We ask that we become generous givers during this Christmas season. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

Grandy Sandy Davis

A Wanderer Returns

This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found. So they began to celebrate. —Luke 15:24

The darkness of night had begun to settle in. I could hardly make out the narrow roadway in front of me now. The rain had stopped, but water drops still fell from the trees that loomed over me. It had been a long time since anyone had cut back the shrubs and grasses bordering the path. They pressed in against me now as if to block my way forward.

“Why did I come?” I wondered, “I’ve been away too long. If they remember me at all, will they want to see me? Why would they?”

There on the gravel pathway, I stopped, stood still, remembered. I remembered stubborn actions, appeals for change, angry words, quarrels stopping just short of blows, a final, grimly silent parting.

I turned on my heels and began the backward trek. Only a few steps down the road I stopped again. There were other memories. I thought of family laughter by the fire with friends, warm meals, kind words, early acceptance and approval.

“All that is gone for many years,” I thought, “and yet...”

I turned again and followed the path to its end. In the faint light of the moon the old house looked unchanged. I heard no sound. The upstairs windows were dark. I came closer. I thought a faint light gleamed in the living room.

I stepped onto the porch and knocked gently on the door.

Help me, Lord, in this holiday season, to put aside the past, to mend lost friendships as best I can, to welcome old friends who turn to me.

Guy Johnson

A Prayer-Song for the Advent Season

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning. —Psalm 130: 5-6

Listen!

Listen, listen! Come be still!
God is speaking. Hear His will.
All of creation holding its breath,
Silence encompassing all life and death.

God is near. God is here. Silence the turmoil inside.
Holy ground, all around. Here in His presence abide.

Listen, listen! Come be still!
God is speaking. Hear His will.
Stars cease their wandering, angel choirs sigh.
Heaven stands watching. Yahweh is nigh!

Listen, listen! Come be still!
God is speaking. Hear His will.
Thoughts constellating deep in your heart,
Visions of wonderment taking their start.

God is near. God is here. Silence the turmoil inside.
Holy ground, all around. Here in His presence abide.

God of all that is and is to come, help us to listen for your words. Reveal to our limited minds the thousands of ways you speak to us. Still our hearts so that in the silence we may hear the beauty of your voice. Amen.

Betty Schroeder

Welcome in Surprise

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. And an angel of God appeared to them and the glory of God shone on them and they became very afraid. But, the angel said to them “Do not be afraid! I bring you good news of great joy, that will be for ALL the people” —Luke 2: 8,9 (NIV)

I can imagine the shepherds that night, perhaps sitting chatting by a fire at the end of the evening. They must have felt at home in their place of work, comfortable in the routine of one more evening of the same old routine.

God, I believe, often breaks into our places of routine and comfort. His surprise may come in the birth of a child, the death of a friend or a great flood. It is interesting to see in Scripture that the appearance of angels does not in itself always result in fear. I wonder what it was about these angels that frightened the shepherds?

Change by itself is not necessarily frightening, but I think it is the surprise of moving out and away from the familiar. Our routine may feel like the welcome place, but often it is the extraordinary miracles of life that bring us to a new place of welcome.

Gracious God of surprise, may we be attentive this Advent season to the new ways you draw us to yourself. May the places of surprise in our lives lead us to see the gift of new life you offer us.

Deirdré Halliburton

Welcome the Giving

“So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.” —Matthew 6:34

One year was very financially hard for us. It was close to Christmas, and we knew we would not be able to give our two daughters gifts as the year before. We called a family meeting in the kitchen in order to explain to our 10- and 8-year-old daughters.

I promised them that we would try and make this an eventful Christmas if nothing else. The girls were very understanding and told us not to worry. The first thing we did was to wrap boxes that had a strip of paper with a prayer or scripture written on it that they had picked out. I did not want a barren Christmas tree. That would have been sad.

We made things by hand, construction paper chains and other handmade ornaments and bows. Through our home church we found of a need for delicately used toys for homeless children. We went through their toys, they each picked out what they no longer used, and we wrapped them and brought them to church. The girls had a lot of fun doing this. We did things with fruit and homemade pastries. We sewed things from outgrown clothes to give away. We were blessed that we had food.

This poor Christmas turned out to be the best Christmas ever; our girls, now 51 and 49, still bring up these memories during the Holidays.

This special Christmas taught us all that gifts are better given than received and a much better understanding of that statement. We always kept Christ in Christmas, but this year was especially dear to us.

Dear Lord our Savior, we so often get caught up in the moment of Christmas that we forget the real meaning of why you were born. You give us so much to be thankful for. Help us realize that you came as a gift to us and that is the only gift we will ever need. We worship your HOLY NAME. Amen.

Kathleen Adams

Welcome in Relationship

For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. —Philippians 1:6

Welcome. It’s a noun, an exclamation, a verb and an adjective. Just the word itself sounds welcoming! While there are a few variations on “welcome,” the definition that speaks to me this Advent season is “to accept with pleasure the occurrence or presence of.”

I think of that day when I first accepted Jesus into my life and started my personal relationship with Him. God was there all the time, calling me to Him, but it took time for my heart and mind to become open to accept His presence. When it happened, I accepted with pleasure. Pleasure—defined as a source of delight and joy—has continued throughout these 30 years to bring hope and peace to my life.

I think of welcoming Jesus into my daily life—through the good times, the tough times and the ordinary times. I can’t say this happens every day, but it certainly is my goal. Saying yes to Jesus daily translates into how we treat others and how we live our life as an example of love. When we accept this calling daily with pleasure or joy, it implies that we have a willing spirit. It is so easy to go days or weeks not paying attention to a daily call to accept Jesus; we must stay awake and be intentional so that we do not stray too far. And if we do, we once again accept Him and fall into His waiting arms.

I think of welcoming the Holy Spirit’s guidance. Accepting the Holy Spirit means we are looking for that still, small voice inside us, nudging us to become more like Jesus. Again, when we do this with a willing spirit, we can experience the joy of a new discovery.

I think of how I’ve been given examples of welcoming many times in my life. My mom is a great cook and entertainer. Mom prepared for traditional holiday gatherings by cooking for weeks in advance, resulting in a large spread of food and a presentation fit for a magazine. At 80, she still goes all out when the family gathers at her house to celebrate. She plans menus months in advance, cooks weeks in advance, decorates her house beautifully and anticipates the occasion with enthusiasm. Having experienced this all my life, it paints a wonderful picture in my mind about “going all out” to welcome. I think to myself, “What if I approached all opportunities to welcome with this attitude? What if I went ‘all out’ on a daily basis to welcome Jesus into my life?” I imagine that my interactions with others would change in a big way for the better.

Jesus, I welcome you today into my life. Thank you for your presence in my life. Help me to seek Your face each day, so that through Your grace and strength, I may be more like Jesus and show His love to others. Amen.

Kathy King

Week 2

Welcome Neighbor

Read: Isaiah 11:1-10

Light: We offer the following reading as you light the first and second candles on your Advent wreath. If you do not have an Advent wreath, we invite you to light a candle, reminding you of the coming Christ Child, the Prince of Peace.

This is the second Sunday in Advent, and today we light the candles of Hope and Peace. During Advent, we pray that we, as well as all people, will seek God's peace.

(Light the first and second candles)

When we look at the second candle, we remember God's promise of peace. We recall the words of Jesus in John 14:27, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you." With such hatred and vitriol in the world today, it's hard to remember that Jesus is the one who brings peace. As we approach Christmas, let's remember that God's intention is a place of peace, where we love our neighbor and offer them a place of peace and welcome.

Reflect: Isaiah paints stirring images of God's peaceable kingdom: "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together and a little child shall lead them" (Isaiah 11:6). How would you re-write these words for today? Who among your neighbors is most in need of God's peace? How can you help them find peace in their lives?

Pray: Dear God, Thank you for those in our world today who work for peace. Help us look for ways to be peacemakers with our neighbors. May your peace permeate our lives. Amen.

Respond: Think of a situation where you desire peace, either in your life or in the world. Prayerfully ask God to guide you in doing something this week to strive for peace. It could be reaching out to someone from whom you have become separated or it might be writing a letter to your legislator about an injustice. As you become a peacemaker, you will find peace.

*Adapted from UMC Discipleship Ministries 2017 Advent Home Worship

Standing on Tiptoe

"I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." —Matthew 18: 3

Do you remember standing on tiptoe to be able to see the freshly baked cookies cooling on the counter? Perhaps you have stood on tiptoe to watch a magical window display of a tiny train chugging its way through a miniature snow-covered village. Or maybe you have stood on tiptoe to peer into a box of endearing, fluffy puppies.

We stand on tiptoe in anticipation and excitement. We stand on tiptoe with the hope of seeing something wonderful, something that brings joy, something that brings fulfillment of expectation.

Advent is a season of anticipation, a season of longing. It is a time when we find ourselves cautiously watchful. We seek to fill that spot in our hearts that somehow reaches out to the mystery of the divine. In the timelessness of eternity we long once again for the coming of the Messiah. Our hearts ache for a Christmas peace that will envelope the globe, a peace that will shatter prejudice and hatred and banish war.

Our society and traditions will surely call us to all manner of celebratory activities and frenetic preparations for the holiday season – shopping for gifts, decorating the house, attending parties and concerts. But let's remember, every day, to stand under the stars, to peer into the darkness, to be present to the holy mystery of the promise of Advent.

Stand on tiptoe! You might hear a heavenly choir or feel the brush of an angel's wings.

O God of promise, in this season of waiting, help us rediscover in ourselves the simple joy and enthusiasm of a child as we once again await the coming of the promised Messiah. Amen.

Betty Schroeder

Week 4 Welcome Wholeness

Read: Psalm 89:1-4

Light: *We offer the following reading as you light the four candles on your Advent wreath. If you do not have an Advent wreath, we invite you to light a candle, reminding you how God expresses great love for us by sending Jesus to the world.*

This is the fourth Sunday in Advent, and today we light the candle of Love, along with Hope, Joy and Peace. May we remember again God's gift of Jesus to the world and know that God's love for all people is the reason for this gift.

(Light the first, second, third and fourth Advent Candles)

Reflect: The essence of Christmas is love, God's incredible love for us, expressed when God sent Christ into the world to offer of the gift of wholeness and everlasting life. Whenever and wherever we receive God's sacrificial love, whenever and wherever we pass it on to others, whenever and wherever God's love is accepted and shared, Christmas comes once again. What greater love is there? Through Christ, God restores our sense of wholeness and offers us new life.

Pray: Dear God, thank you for the gift of love. May I share this gift with others and learn how to love unconditionally. Help me during the Christmas season to practice love in action with family, friends, neighbors, and strangers. Amen.

Respond: As we get ready to celebrate again the birth of Jesus, we sometimes get very busy. Today, take a ten-minute break. Sit quietly. If it helps you to concentrate, look at your Advent wreath. Pray, asking God's help to bring wholeness and peace to your heart.

Extending Welcome

Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. —Romans 15:7

Growing up in a small town has many advantages. One perk for me as a child was that I could easily walk to visit my grandparents who lived across the street. Several times a day I would go to their house just to be with them. Their house was always a warm, welcoming place. I never had to call first; just a simple knock on the door and a call out of "Grandmother, I'm here, and I'm coming in," was sufficient; no formal "May I come in?" was needed. I was *always* greeted with a warm hug, a kiss and a smile and was made to feel that I was special and loved.

I believe St. John's emanates that same welcoming feeling to those who come to our house of worship and knock on its doors. One only has to say, "Lord, I'm here, and I'm coming in;" no formal salutation is needed to gain entrance into the arms of our church and to be made to feel special and loved.

As we approach this season of Advent and go about our busy schedules in the secular world, we need to remember to extend this feeling of welcoming; not only to our family and friends but also to the stranger in the mall, the impolite clerk at the grocery store and the rude driver on the road.

Help us, O Lord, to continue to be a welcoming church to all who knock on our doors. Help me to be a welcoming disciple all year, and especially during this season when extra responsibilities and stress seem to make our lives more hectic. For the glory of God, AMEN.

Claudia Fowler

* Adapted from UMC Discipleship Ministries 2017 Advent Home Worship

An Innkeeper Speaks

Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.

—Hebrews 13:2

My inn is always open. Every traveler is welcome here. Rich or poor are the same to me; I'll even rent a room to a Roman. Of course, we don't have many strangers passing through who want to stop here. The city is only a few miles farther. Sometimes I go days without a soul checking in. Other times there can be a crowd. That's the way it was during the census. Everyone related to one of the old families from here had to come register. I didn't have an empty room the whole time it was going on.

One couple that came then I can't forget. They were from up north in Galilee. The man had walked the whole way while his wife rode a donkey. It was hard to believe he was a descendant of King David. He was a carpenter without a penny to spare. His wife was a little thing. She never complained, but I knew she was exhausted. She was about to have their baby.

They arrived late one evening. There was no room for them, but I couldn't turn them away. A place in my stable was all I could provide, but I tried to make them comfortable. That night the baby was born. My wife helped. Afterwards she said some shepherds had come to see the child and worshiped him like a king. Later still, strangers from the East came searching for the boy. He would be a great king they said and brought him gifts. Shortly after they left, the young family left also, not for home, they said, but for Egypt.

Nothing stranger has ever happened here. I still don't know what it means. Who was that little boy, I wonder? What will he do in the world?

Help me, Lord, to see the needs of those outside my narrow circle, cheerfully to minister to those needs and to welcome strangers as heartily as I do old friends. Amen.

Guy Johnson

Unwelcome

I sought the LORD and he answered me. He delivered me from all my fears. —Psalm 34:4 (CEB)

If we've worked together on any project you know I'm a perfectionist. I also really like things done my way. This applies to pretty much every aspect of my life (except maybe house cleaning ... but that's another story). I put a lot of time and emotional energy into ensuring my family's life runs smoothly and my girls have fun activities and enriching experiences.

So when something comes along to muck up my carefully planned schedule, it is UNWELCOME.

Jane's broken arm a week and a half before her sixth birthday, a week before her long-planned trampoline birthday party: UNWELCOME.

But there's room for unwelcome, even in such an ordeal. We were given the gift of more down time and more snuggles. We had an even more fun party without the risk to her arm and a very happy birthday girl. And we gained an appreciation of our family's health, knowing we could return to life-as-we-know-it in a few months' time despite the setback.

While I will never welcome an injury to either daughter, I can reflect on the good to come out of even bumner situations.

Father, give us eyes to see the blessings even in the unwelcome events that come our way. Help us make space in our hearts for you as we continue our Advent journey this year. Amen.

Mari Walker

Welcome Preparation

The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. —John 1:14

Would you believe that there are apps that actually count down the days, minutes and seconds until Christmas? No joke. If I want to know where I stand in getting it all done, I can merely click a button and there it is. Down to the nanosecond!

As I think of preparing for Christmas, lots of images fill my head. Not visions of sugar plums but lists upon lists, decorations that need to be pulled out and put up, dinners to plan, gifts to buy, more lists, the preparations seem never ending no matter how organized I think I am. And there are those precious seconds ticking down to Christmas day.

Deep breath. Deep breath.

As we walk into church my eyes are drawn to a beautiful evergreen wreath encircling candles in the center. This simple symbol quietly announces the season of Advent in preparation of our hearts for the celebration of the birth of our Lord and Savior.

Memories wash over me of advent wreaths of my youth and of the simple advent wreaths my children made when they were small. As newcomers to St. John's, we are here because Jesus is welcomed in this sacred place. Come, let us adore Him.

Lord Jesus, You are welcomed in this place. Amen.

Lynn Lohmann

A Warm Welcome*

"... I was a stranger and you welcomed me. ... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." —Matthew 25:35, 40 (NRSV)

Several years ago I was searching for a church that I could call home. I remember one Sunday that Wanda Nelson and Bill Adams were ushers and greeted me outside the front doors of St. John's. They introduced themselves in their warm and gracious manner and then said "I don't think I know you. I'm so glad you came. Tell me your name." After I introduced myself, they said "Harriet, I think you'll like St. John's. Please come back." I did, and I have.

Not long after that, I was visiting my husband at Landmark Nursing Home where he was working very hard to regain mobility after a severe stroke. We were in the visiting room when I heard familiar voices in the hallway. It was Wanda and Bill. They were there to visit a member of St. John's but graciously came in to meet Larry. What a breath of fresh air they brought. What fun and laughter they brought to us with Bill and Larry telling stories about growing up in rural Mississippi. Wanda and Bill's generosity of time, spirit and Christ-like behavior brought relief from fear and sadness and a sense of God's love and presence.

This Advent season offers us opportunities to experience the peace and joy of knowing that God always welcomes us. As life takes its twists and turns, God is our rock and salvation. Isn't it wonderful that He gives us unexpected encounters that can change our lives? If it had been up to us, do you really think we would have planned for the Messiah's birth to be in a stable? Over and over He teaches us not to judge others and to welcome everyone. Even in our final days, we can feel the joy and peace of knowing that we are passing into God's welcoming arms. I have a feeling that God has already put Bill to work welcoming newcomers to His Heavenly Kingdom!

Gracious God, thank you for your many blessings. Help us to always be warm and welcoming to all as you are warm and welcoming to us.

*Written with permission of Wanda Nelson on October 29, 2017, the day after the Celebration of Life for Bill Adams.

Harriet Walters

Welcome in Family

“Truly, anyone who welcomes my messenger is welcoming me, and anyone who welcomes me is welcoming the Father who sent me.”

—John 13:20 (NLT)

Thinking of my childhood years in Wisconsin, I remember welcoming my grandfather and a young uncle early every Christmas morning. There were seven children in my mother’s family, and my grandfather visited all of them on Christmas morning. He asked to see our tree and our gifts and made appropriate comments on all of them. He and my uncle always had something to eat and drink, so by the time they visited every family they were feeling very happy! This visit was a special part of Christmas Day, and I always remember it as a special time.

Other Christmas rituals I remember were associated with either going home or doing special things at home – lighting candles and having a time of family prayer during Advent, decorating a Christmas tree, caroling in the neighborhood, or hosting parties for friends, neighbors and family members. Christmas is about home and being welcomed.

Dear God, Thank you for your son, Jesus. Thank you for those in our world who seek to act for peace. Help us to look for ways to be welcoming and to be peacemakers at home, at church and at school. Amen.

Dawn Staves

Christmas Dishes

We have different gifts that are consistent with God’s grace that has been given to us. —Romans 12:6a

Soon after we moved to Baton Rouge I joined a First Presbyterian Church women’s Bible study that was held at a member’s house each week. The welcome we all received was warm, to say the least. The host always had a delicious snack, hot coffee and plenty of comfortable seating for our in-depth study of Scripture.

As it got closer to Christmas our host began to use her gorgeous Christmas dishes to serve the group. They were lovely and perfectly suited to the household including matching plates and bowls of various sizes, mugs, themed silverware and sparkling glasses. I coveted those dishes. I started looking online at Christmas dishes and perusing sets in stores, wondering if I should buy my own set.

But I remembered – I don’t host a Bible study. I don’t even host family meals for the most part. If I bought Christmas dishes they would be taking up space, and at the time we lived in a small one-bedroom apartment.

I don’t have the gift of hospitality that our Bible study host showed us week after week. Invitations to my home are few and far between, not because I wouldn’t welcome you in but because it’s not a natural reflex or habit.

God has given me other gifts with which to serve and connect. So far those gifts don’t include the need for a set of Christmas dishes!

Father, strip away our desire for more, more, more. Allow us to focus our attention on the coming of your Son and the beautiful miracle of His birth. Show us our gifts and teach us to use them well. Amen.

Mari Walker

Should I Welcome in Adversity?

Jesus answered them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Messiah!' and they will lead many astray. And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: all this is but the beginning of the birth pangs. Then they will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of my name. Then many will fall away, and they will betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come. —Matthew 24:4-14 (NRSV)

I am a physician, and I was recently notified by a patient that she was transferring all her medical care to Livingston Parish and would no longer require my services. She was not dissatisfied with me or my staff, but her reason was that she was "truly afraid" to come to Baton Rouge because of "the fast rising crime rate."

The Advent lectionary is full of apocalyptic scriptures like this excerpt from Matthew's gospel. We look forward to Christ's return as well as look back to Christ's incarnation. I've often thought that apocalyptic scriptures cannot resonate with someone like me who lives in comfort and safety. These passages are meant to give hope to someone living under persecution. But my former patient teaches me that persecution or threat can be subjective. I confess that after Hurricane Katrina the rumors of roving bands of thugs from New Orleans caused me to delay lending assistance at the River Center shelter. I thought I needed to protect my family and home. Fear does not facilitate acts of mercy.

Faith is not certainty; rather, greater certainty requires less faith and less certainty requires greater faith. Faith is the passion to proceed and persevere without assurance of a desired outcome. Perhaps these apocalyptic scriptures are meant to toughen us up. Perhaps they are meant to prevent us from interpreting failure or adversity as evidence that we are in the wrong.

I think the words of this hymn well sum up the apocalyptic scriptures:

*This is my Father's world. O let me ne'er forget
That though the wrong seems oft so strong,
God is the ruler yet.*

Heavenly Father, grant me faith and courage in the face of adversity (perceived or real) so that I may say, "Thus would I have it!" Amen.

Ray Halliburton

Welcome in Strangers

"For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me." —Matthew 25: 35-36

First impressions are important! Sometimes people can welcome us into their lives or shut us out completely in just one simple encounter. Some folks seem to automatically radiate a sense of welcome in their smiles, or perhaps in their kind words upon meeting. Others project anger and unhappiness that in no way suggest welcome. Today more than ever we look for those people and places that make us feel safe and welcome. However, our fear of the unknown today has caused many of us to withdraw within our own worlds, unable to welcome anyone.

"Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" are words found in Romans 15:7. As we enter the Advent season we should remember that Jesus died for us so that we would come to know God. He is instructing us to be a welcoming people. Certainly there are persons who are harder to welcome than others. The strangers who are sick, poor or different offer a challenge to our hospitality.

People have often described St. John's as a warm and welcoming congregation. Is that true only within the safety of our sanctuary and campus, or does it extend to the world beyond our doors? Do we risk welcoming strangers? How we treat the bank teller, new neighbors on the block or the check-out girl at our grocery store reflects our own Christianity. The kindness we show or the lack of it is a reflection of how we feel about Jesus. By the grace of God we should dare to welcome everyone with whom we come into contact this Advent season and beyond. Perhaps your welcome might be the impetus that brings one more person to God.

Heavenly Father, Let me never forget that something as simple as a smile or a pat on the back may be the only welcoming sign someone has received in a very long time. Let me share God's message of hope to every person I meet.

Bobbi Marino

Emmanuel at Our Table

Keep loving each other like family. Don't neglect to open up your homes to guests, because by doing this some have been hosts to angels without knowing it.

—Hebrews 13: 1-2

Knock, knock, knock. I look through the front door window. On the porch stands a dirty, smelly man, tattered rags for clothes. His sock hat sits crooked on his head, and his socks show through the several worn holes of his shoes. “Mom, Emmanuel is here again,” I call down the hallway.

My mom drops the laundry she was folding and comes to unlock the door. “Hello, Emmanuel. Come on in.” The homeless man steps in timidly.

“Hey, Ben,” he says, removing his hat as he steps inside. I am surprised he remembers my name. I first met him three weeks ago when he came to our door begging for money, not knowing what sort of response he'd get.

“Hi, Emmanuel,” I politely respond. I intuitively know Emmanuel is a kind, gentle, Christian man whose life simply fell apart. Mom invites him to sit at the table and goes to prepare our guest a meal.

I deliver the glass of orange juice my mom pours. I sit in the chair across from Emmanuel while he recounts stories of his last several weeks of living on the streets. He has a hard life, especially in these winter months. “Too many of us on the streets and not enough folks like y'all offering kindness...” his voice trails off.

Mom brings in a sandwich and soup for him. He eats it slowly, savoring each bite as if it might be his last for a while. Even at 7, I realize this may be the only meal he will eat for the next few days. My mother and I sit and talk with him.

He thanks my mother for the meal, complimenting her cooking. She offers him a shower and some time to rest inside our warm house. “Oh, Ms. Hartman, I would much appreciate that.” Mom ushers him to the bathroom. When clean, he dresses in his clothes Mom washed for him. The three of us load into the car, and Mom drives us to the local public transit station. Emmanuel climbs out of the car, thanking my mom several times over.

Mom offers Emmanuel some cash. “Oh thank you. God bless you all.” He closes the car door then climbs on the bus to pay his fare.

This would not be the last time I would see Emmanuel. He visited our house on and off for a few years, as my parents exhibited the true Christian spirit of helping those in need. They recognized that many were less fortunate not because of their own fault but through unforeseen circumstances.

Loving God, Open my eyes, that I may be an innkeeper that offers those in need shelter from the cold and storm. May I recognize my own blessings and pass them on to others. In Jesus Name, Amen.

Ben Hartman

An Attitude of Welcome

But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

—Luke 10:42

Having company over was always hard work. Momma and us kids cleaned everything, from the windows to the sinks to the floors. Our house might not have been the fanciest, but it would be clean. We wanted to make our house look as nice as possible so that our guests felt welcome. Southern women have standards about hospitality, after all.

There's an entire industry set up around cultivating hospitable homes. We watch hours of DIY shows about making beautiful centerpieces and seasonal decor. We spend thousands to have just the right dishes and cream cheese dips to impress our guests. We worry that our guests might see that one spot on the window pane or the mud that one cousin tracked in on his shoes. We stress so much about these outward symbols of hospitality that they limit our ability to develop our inward practices of hospitality.

What would it look like if we spent as much time cultivating hospitable hearts as we did hospitable living rooms? What if, like Mary, we stopped and listened to the guests in our homes and lives instead of worrying about if the situation was clean and respectable enough? What if we stopped worrying about “respectable” hospitality and started making room in our state, our cities, our homes and our hearts for those without shelter, those without safety and those without their own perfect wreaths and placemats?

Lord, Give us eyes to see ourselves and our hearts as You see them. Help us to be people who make room in our lives not just when we look our best or for those who won't track mud on our floors. Help us to develop an attitude of welcome and hospitality, not just the symbols of them. Amen.

Kristine Isenhower

Welcome to the Party

“He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me.” —Matthew 10:40

Another word for “receives” is “welcomes”—so, reading this scripture passage in a different way: whoever welcomes me as a follower of Jesus, also welcomes Jesus, as well as God, who sent Jesus to us all. I like this passage, because it establishes a bond between believers like you and me, Jesus and God. God initiated the bond by sending Jesus to us, and we make a decision to welcome Him and be a follower of Jesus. Then, anytime we take the step of going out—and we are welcomed by others—we are expanding that bond by giving others the opportunity to welcome Jesus and the one who sent Him, God. The circle is complete, yet goes on and on as long as we continue to step out in faith and offer the love of Jesus to others.

Christmas time is the perfect time to show others that we are excited about welcoming Jesus into our lives. Anytime we are invited to a party and are welcomed into someone else’s home during this Christmas season, we should remember that whoever so kindly welcomed us also welcomed Jesus and the one who sent Him, God. This gives me a new purpose with each and every Christmas party I attend this season. I have a mission—to be God’s messenger and show my love for Jesus so that those who so kindly welcomed me will also be welcoming Jesus and God into their homes. In that way, others will have the opportunity to receive the blessing of participating in God’s Kingdom here on earth. What an awesome and profound responsibility we have as we “party” our way through this Christmas season.

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for letting us know that each of us believers have such a valuable part to play in your kingdom work. Even when all we are doing is attending a Christmas party, help us remember we are always there as your messenger. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Theresa Sandifer

Love and Servanthood

For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten son! —John 3:16

Christmas time is a time for families to gather to show love to each other and others. Many people become servants to the less fortunate during the holiday times more than at other times of the year.

When you look up quotes about love online, there are more than 3,500 of them. In almost all of these quotes, love entails doing something. Love isn’t love until you give it away. Love the Lord with all your heart, all your mind and your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. God so loved the world that He gave his only son.

When my brother was in high school, he performed in a play, and one of the lines throughout the play was “Turn the lights off.” My brother is older than I and does not remember the play. I certainly do not even know the name of the play, but perhaps you do. It was finally explained in the play that every time you tell a person to turn the lights off you are telling them that you love them.

Often I try to be a servant, and it just does not work out the way I wish. I try to give a person a buggy at the store and they will not let me. I tell a person to go ahead of me in line when my basket is overflowing and they have only a few items. Sometimes I get thanked and other times I get “Oh, are you sure that you mean it?” I would not have offered to do it if I did not mean it.

Martha tried to show her love for Jesus by keeping a clean house. No one will ever accuse me of being a Martha. I have several excellent excuses for not being Martha. Dusting makes me sneeze. My back hurts. I would rather be doing something for someone else like writing a letter or buying your grandchild something useful.

In the big picture GOD is not going to judge me on how clean the house is or isn’t. God looks at how much I love others today, not tomorrow or yesterday. Every day I should dress in the most important garment of all, LOVE.

During this season and every day, “St. John’s, turn the lights out.”

Lord of all of us, please show us each day ways to love. Let us remember others daily and not only at Christmas by showing the type of love you show us. We ask these things in your name, believing.

Daphne G. Grady

Week 3 Welcome Celebration

Read: Isaiah 35:1-10

Light: We offer the following reading as you light the first three candles on your Advent wreath. If you do not have an Advent wreath, we invite you to light a candle, reminding you of the joy that comes at Christmas.

This is the third Sunday in Advent, and today we light three candles. The candle of Joy joins the candles of Hope and Love. May remember again God's gift of Jesus to the world and know the joy his presence brings.

(Light the first, second and third candles)

Reflect: Christ came to lift people up, not tear us down. Christ came to save us, not to destroy. Christ came as a gift of love, and in response, we offer joy and celebration. This Christmas, we will be "welcomed home with gifts of joy and gladness" (Isaiah 35:10, The Message).

Pray: Dear God, Thank you for the joy remembering Jesus' birth brings to my life. Help me live in such a way that my words and my actions help others know of the joy You give and the joy of this special season. Amen.

Respond: There are people in our neighborhoods, in our church and in our community who need to know of God's joy. Select someone to visit by phone or in person this week. It doesn't necessarily have to be a visit to a home. Maybe there is someone you see in a place where you go to eat. Stop by and talk with that person. Tell the person you visit one way he or she brings joy to you.

"People Look East. Love, the Guest, Is On the Way"

See, I will send my messenger who will prepare the way before me. —Malachi 3:1

In looking through old files recently, I ran across a letter tucked away that my mother had written to me. In it she was thanking me for their visit to our home in Houma, La., for Christmas 1984. Nothing out of the ordinary, except that I had not seen this letter in more than 30 years. There it was, coming back to me again, as though I was reading it for the first time. She wrote of how much she enjoyed unwrapping and putting the gifts out that we had given them when they returned home. Her favorite gift from us was the picture we had framed of John, Lane and me sitting on the front steps of our home. I know that picture well. Our copy is now on our dresser in the bedroom. Reading that letter and holding those handwritten pages was like a part of her coming back to me as we prepare again for a Season of Advent and Christmas 2017. She closed with these words, "We had such a good time being with all of you. It was one of the best Christmases we have ever spent."

What made that Christmas so special? I cannot say exactly. Yet I think it is what we long for each year. We long to "make it so special, it will be remembered as one of the best ever." When that happens, I sense it is not because of something special that was under the Christmas tree. Rather it is the way we came together as family, as friends. It is the way we opened our hearts to one another, shared with one another, laughed together, played together, sat at the table together. Will we remember 30-plus years from now what the gifts were? I doubt it. But there is something about celebrating the birth of the Christ Child that holds the potential to create and capture memories that will linger for a lifetime. Memories like those that appeared to me in her letter. This Advent carol calls us to this season of preparation for those coming to share it with us, and to look about, for Love, the Guest, is on the way.

*People, look east. The time is near
of the crowning of the year.
Make your house fair as you are able,
trim the hearth and set the table.
People, look east.
Love, the Guest, is on the way.
By Eleanor Farjeon*