

Advent and Christmas 2023 at St. John's UMC

"The Gift of Many Names" Advent series begins

November 26, worship at 8:30 & 11 a.m.

Advent-themed C.H.A.O.S. (for Children & Families) *November 26, 4-6 p.m.*

Elf Night (for Children) *December 1, 6-8:30 p.m.*

Advent Fest (Churchwide) *December 10, 5-6:30 p.m.*

13th Annual Great Turkey Giveaway
December 16, volunteers arrive at 7 a.m.

"A Star of Hope: An Advent Festival of Music & Rhyme"
December 17, worship at 8:30 & 11 a.m.

Craft & Bake Sale for Missions (hosted by UWF) *December 17, all morning*

Youth Christmas Party (hosted at Broadmoor UMC) *December 17 at 5:30 p.m.*

The Longest Night Service *December 21 at 6 p.m.*

Christmas Eve Worship *December 24 at 10 a.m. and 5 p.m.*

New Year's Eve Worship *December 31, one service at 10 a.m.*

Epiphany Celebration
*January 7, worship at 8:30 & 11 a.m.
Receive your Star Word for 2024*



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
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Join us for Sunday worship at 8:30 or 11 a.m.

In person and livestream on YouTube and Facebook @stjohnsbr

THANK YOU

Thank you to all of our writers who made this devotional possible.
Special thanks to **Barbara Benton** and **Betty Schroeder** for their editing assistance and to **Lynn Cooper** for final touches and printing.
Layout by Mari Walker



Advent & Christmas 2023

A devotional written by members and friends of
St. John's United Methodist Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

Foreward: The Gift of Advent

Can you believe it's Christmas time again? 'Tis the season for cooler weather (we hope), Christmas carols, nativity scenes, family gatherings, making a list and checking it twice, and retelling the story of the birth of Jesus. Are you ready?

If not, you're not the only one. Thankfully, the rhythm of the church's liturgical calendar is designed to prepare us for a holy and wonderful (emphasis on both the "wonder" and the "full") season.

Advent reminds us of the coming of Christ into the world and into our lives once again. It helps prepare us emotionally and spiritually to welcome Jesus into our hearts, to re-examine ourselves, to experience the wonder and mystery of Emmanuel – "God-with-us." How do you practice Advent? How do you prepare yourself spiritually for Christmas?

Our family has a tradition of lighting candles each week, using a small Advent wreath that Ben and I received as a wedding present. We light a candle and have a reading or a prayer, reminding us that Christ is coming and preparing our hearts for his arrival. If you want to make this an Advent practice of yours, we have provided weekly Advent Candle Lightings for Home. You may also combine this ritual with readings found in the pages of this deeply poignant and personal Advent devotional.

We are blessed to have so many creative writers among our St. John's church family. As a way to unite around a common spiritual practice this Advent, the St. John's Writer's Group has compiled writings and reflections from our congregation into this daily devotional. Reading a short story or reflection, pondering a passage from scripture, and sharing in prayer every day are helpful ways to remember the reason for the season.

Many people find meaning through serving in the Advent season. Shopping for gifts for a child from one of our neighborhood schools, making financial donations, supporting the United Women in Faith's Craft & Bake Sale for missions, assisting with The Great Turkey Giveaway (December 16) are some of the ways that we can share the Christmas spirit of caring, loving, and serving.

One of the most significant ways to celebrate Advent is through worship. Join us each week for joyful worship as we sing your favorite carols, light the Advent candles, and reflect upon the significance of the Christ-child for our lives and the world today! Gathering as a faith community helps us to practice Advent together. Worship keeps us grounded in the One whose birth we celebrate.

This year's Advent theme, "The Gift of Many Names," invites us to consider the meaning behind the names and titles given to Jesus, ahead of his birth. His parents gave him the name Jesus. But the prophets, shepherds, magi, and the angels each had a different way of addressing him. He was the Messiah, the Lord, the Savior, Emmanuel, and the Light of the World. Each week during Advent, we will explore the meaning of these titles and reflect upon the significance of the Christ child for our lives and the world. Each of these names reveals a bit more of the story around who Jesus was and still is today.

Spiritual G.P.S.

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem...ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. —Matthew 2:1, 9b-10

Today is Epiphany! It is the day in the church calendar when we remember the star-studded journey of the magi, which led them to Jesus. Epiphany is the celebration of God's presence breaking through to shine as a light for all the world. The Divine is revealed and made manifest in the hearts of these travelers from afar. And they emerge from this experience "overwhelmed by joy." I love that! I want that! I want to be overwhelmed with joy, too.

Like a spiritual G.P.S., the magi followed their hearts by allowing a star to guide their way. While I cannot cast a new star in the sky, I can offer you a creative prayer practice through a Star Word to accompany you in the New Year, guiding you closer to Christ. A Star Word is a contemporary tradition of receiving an intention word on Epiphany. Imprinted upon a star, your Star Word is a word for you to consider as a guidepost for your year.

I encourage you to join us for worship on January 7 to receive a Star Word. The magi followed a star to find the Christ child. We are also seeking Jesus in our daily lives, trusting that the Holy Spirit *can* and *does* use signs to guide us closer to the Divine presence. Consider your Star Word your spiritual G.P.S. Perhaps you will see something in your word that others may not – just like the magi who determined the Star of Bethlehem marked their destiny.

What might you learn from one word?
 What new ideas might emerge?
 What treasured wisdom might you discern?

As we seek guidance for the journey ahead, may your spiritual quest and your sacred work include possibilities from the stars.

God of starlight, like the Magi so long ago, we too, are seeking you. In this new year, we ask that once more, you give us a sign. As you guide our journey, may we be more open to your presence and willing to follow where you lead. We are hopeful, O God. Overwhelm us with joy. In the name of the One who is the keeper of the stars. Amen.

Rev. Lane Cotton Winn

Friday, January 5, 2024

Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. —Isaiah 9:6

I'm different and I like it! Some might even say I'm weird and that's ok, too. I love it when I come home from work, get everything ready for the next day, take a shower, eat dinner and get in bed by 7 p.m. Can you say delightful? I also love when I experience peace, calm, and tranquility, especially when something unexpected happens. It took years of trusting God to remain calm when little things would get on my last nerve. That's why I'm determined not to allow anyone or anything to steal my peace. Jesus gave it to me. I refuse to let anything keep me from it!

Well, with that being said, the enemy has been trying to steal my peace. Sometimes I feel like he's winning. In January I picked up my "Star Word." The word was "journey." Trust me when I say God has a sense of humor! I can see him rolling on the floor laughing at me whenever I start whining.

God has been taking me on a spiritual and physical journey this year. Have you ever heard the phrase, "Be careful what you pray for?" I prayed and God answered my prayer. I didn't realize that the answer to my prayer would be both rewarding and challenging. I'm still on this journey, and it's still difficult. However, God is restoring my inner peace.

"There is peace like a river, there is peace like a river, there is peace like a river in my soul."

Dear God, Thank you for the Prince of Peace and for allowing us to experience peace in the midst of chaos. In Jesus name amen

Journey - a Star Word Poem

Take me on a journey Lord so that I may draw closer to you

Open my eyes and ears, so that I may understand all you are revealing to me

As I journey with you Lord Jesus please take away everything that is not like you.

Lord guide me steadily and show me where to go

L. Darlene Dickson

The reflections, poetry, and prose within this devotional invite us to explore some of the many names of Jesus and what they can tell us about the child whose birth we celebrate at Christmas. I know you will be fed spiritually by these original writings by our St. John's family and friends.

There are many ways to embrace the gift of Advent. How will you use your Advent gift and prepare yourself for the coming of Christ once again into our midst?

Blessings on the journey,
Pastor Lane

Rev. Lane Cotton Winn | Lead Pastor, St. John's United Methodist Church

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Prince of Peace

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. —John 14:27

When thoughts turmoil my heart
and worries wrinkle my mind
I go to Jesus
in the woods
and find him waiting
there.
In the laid-down grasses
where doe rested with her fawn,
in the gentle rhythm of tree frog's chant,
in the exuberant vine climbing the oak,
in the silent flight of owl returning to rest for the day.
In the soothing call of cricket,
in the smell of fallen leaves,
in the flashing wings of swallow,
in the water of pond, still and bright.
Here, the Prince of Peace
holds my hand
stills my mind
calms my heart.
O, joyous peace!

Wonderful God, we thank you for the peace you offer through your beloved son. Help us to find that stillness and sanctuary we seek in times of turmoil. Amen.

Betty Schroeder

I pray for courage and He makes me daring.
 I pray for direction and He journeys with me.
 I pray for confirmation and he proves again and again He is a promise-keeper.
 I pray for wisdom and light and love and He pours His spirit into me to overflowing.

We can ask anything in Jesus' name. He tells us we can. He tells us that He will do it and He does! I am proof! You are proof! Thanks be to God for a love like that.

Most Holy and Loving God, thank you that you are a promise-keeper. Thank you that you hear the cries of my heart and fill my mind and spirit with good things. Forgive me for the times that I have been impatient in waiting, for the times that I have called out for your direction not realizing that you set me on Your path for me from the moment you knitted me together in my mother's womb. Thank you that you always journey with me, even in the waiting. By your Spirit within me, move me to do the mighty works that you have done so that I may glorify Your Holy Name, the ever-present life-giver, in all things. Thanks be to God! Amen

Natalie Cooper



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Sunday, November 26, 2023

Wednesday, January 3, 2024

The Gift of a Name

Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine.
—Isaiah 43:1

Do you wonder by what name God calls you? I do. I have a deep conviction that my God-given name will be one that has somehow spoken to me my whole life. The thing is, I don't have a name, at least a name that I can call my own. 'Betty' is a borrowed name, meant to be put on the birth certificate only temporarily until my parents who were expecting and anticipating the birth of a boy-child could finally come to some agreement about a suitable name for me. That time never came, and I have gone through life with the nickname of an attending nurse in a hospital in Atlanta.

When my son Luke and his bride Anna were told the gender of their baby girl months before her birth, they immediately and excitedly named her Stevie Irene. We all talked about Stevie for those months with great joy and anticipation. And I was sometimes overwhelmed by the amazing rightness of that gift Stevie had received from her loving parents – the gift of a name that would be her own for all her life.

We know that our Savior was given his name 'Jesus' by God himself. It wasn't the name that the friends and families expected, and there was surely surprise and pushback. And we also know that Jesus received many beautiful descriptive names that we encounter in scripture. But for me, the best name to call him, the one that evokes the loving care of his father, the one that I can call on in any situation, is Jesus.

Loving God, you blessed your son with a name you chose. For us, that name is above all others, and we are overwhelmed by the love you have shown to all people by the gift of your beloved son. Help us live lives worthy of your gift. Amen.

Betty Schroeder

The Promise-Keeper

Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it. —John 14: 12-14

In January 2023, I was delighted to select my star word at our Epiphany worship service. I love star words. As I wrote in a Faith Story *Anticipating a Star Word*: "They are "the words I carry with me for at least a year, and even beyond. They have taken my breath away; they've left my mind pondering, my heart pounding and my soul stirring; they've made me pay attention to them."

While each star word can be considered and experienced singularly, I am realizing that the star words I've collected over the years have amounted to a Holy constellation, a harmonious symphony – a love song from our Lord written just for me, His melodic call upon my life. Through these star words, Jesus has proven Himself again and again, and centers me in His trustworthy goodness:

Jesus the **daring leader**

Jesus the **promise keeper**

Jesus the giver of the life-**spirit**

Growing in love with our Savior Jesus Christ, I cannot help but recognize the ever-present Spirit of God with me throughout my life. In my youngest years I remember reading His Holy Word, not with wise understanding but often with many questions, knowing that in His time He would make these things clear to me. He has done this and more and continues to do, as it is God's nature to give and give abundantly.

Waiting to hear His clear call upon my life and how I might serve Him, crying out "when Lord?!" He imparts His perfect wisdom upon me, showing me that His good work within me has been a lifetime in the making. I have found myself so concerned with the "when?" of the waiting that I failed to see that the rooting up, the planting and the sowing have all been well underway. He has most assuredly led my life in bold ways; He has kept His promises; He has filled me to overflowing with His reviving Spirit. It is a joy to be alive and never have I loved my life as I do now.

Never did I imagine that I could love my life and love who He has made me to be as I do now. This powerful love He has poured into me has freed me from the darkest depths of depression and erased my selfish longings to usher this earthly life to a close, dead and buried with potential in tact.

Tuesday January 2, 2024

Childhood Christmas Memories of Peace

The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?” —Psalm 27:1

I remember another childhood Christmas. We lived in southern California while all of our family lived in the Midwest: Iowa, Kansas, Missouri and more. Over the years we would drive those many miles to visit family usually in the summertime. This year for some reason we chose to spend Christmas with them.

Whenever we drove those many miles my parents wanted to spend the least amount of our time on the road with more time for family fun. We would spend the night in a motel, get breakfast and hit the road. Mom would make sandwiches in the car for lunch as the two of them would take turns behind the wheel. We would stop for dinner and then continue driving long after dark. My Dad liked Nash cars which made it so the seats would lie flat so the passenger side became our bed while they continued down the road. We were out in the middle of Kansas farm country one night in a snowstorm when the inevitable car trouble happened. A fan blade had broken off and punctured the radiator. My Dad pulled over to the side of the road and hiked to the nearest farmhouse some distance away. This was the 1950s and the farmer was more than happy to help my Dad. They somehow plugged the radiator hole, filled it up with water and got us on the road to the nearest town with the needed amenities. I'm sure the farmer's wife sent along some Christmas goodies for us kids.

The next morning the car was repaired and while Dad waited, the rest of us explored the little snow-covered town and did a little more Christmas shopping. We arrived at my Aunt and Uncle's farmhouse in Missouri in time for Christmas Eve and woke up Christmas morning to a blanket of new fallen snow. Lots of fun hiking to the bathroom outhouse and making our own footprints in the snow on the way.

Christmas dinner was in Kansas City with more family to share in the festivities. It is one of my favorite Christmas memories, giving thanks for family and a safe journey.

God of love, during this season we remember another long journey when Joseph and Mary spent long days on the road to Bethlehem. We thank you for the miraculous plans you made for that very special family and for the greatest gift to all mankind, Jesus, the Prince of Peace. Amen.

Lenni Stickles

Advent Candle Lightings For Home

Bring the tradition of lighting candles during Advent into your home with these weekly readings and candle lighting rituals. Begin by gathering five candles. The Advent wreath at church has three purple candles, one pink candle, and one white candle. If you can't find those colors, use any five candles to represent the four Sundays of Advent and Christmas. To create a wreath, scatter greens, herbs, ribbons, or paper chains around the candles. Set aside time each week to share in the following readings.

Hope: Week of November 26

The first week of Advent we remember the gift of Hope we have in Christ. The prophets of Israel spoke of the coming of Jesus, who was the Messiah, the anointed one, a king from the line of David. They spoke of how he would rule the world wisely and bless all nations.

As followers of Christ, we wait with hope for his return. The candle of hope reminds us that God's light can shine in a world full of shadows.

Light one purple candle.

Reflect: How have you have experienced hope this week?

Loving God, we thank you for the gift of hope. In a world so full of despair, we put our hope in you. Wherever we find ourselves this Advent season, remind us the hope Christ's coming brings for the world and for our very lives. We ask this in the name of the one born in Bethlehem, Jesus, the Messiah, our Lord. Amen.



Monday, November 27, 2023

Monday January 1, 2024

A Star Shone Over Bethlehem - A Star of Hope

A Star Shone over Bethlehem

A new star shone on high that night,
 Radiant, clear, a cheering light,
 A heartwarming beacon seen from afar,
 Larger than any neighboring star.
 But below in the weary world were few
 Wakeful and watchful this sight to view:
 Shepherds on duty guarding their sheep,
 Those whose worries robbed them of sleep,
 Fishers at midnight casting their net,
 Astrologers noting the stars' rise and set.
 These were the ones who could look up and see
 The star and ask what its message might be.

A Star of Hope

On the hillsides just south of King David's town,
 The sheep and their keepers had long settled down.
 Of the five shepherds one was quite new,
 Ari by name; he was very young, too.
 His jobs for the night, old Lemuel said,
 Were to tend the campfire and guard the night's bread,
 Jobs he could do in the wink of an eye
 And still have time to gaze at the sky.
 And so he came to see the star
 Beaming invitingly from afar.
 He sat entranced as if in a dream,
 Caught up in the light of its golden gleam.
 The others returned to find the fire cold,
 And Ari awoke to hear them scold.
 But he showed them the star

Childhood Christmas Memories of Love

I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread. They are always generous and lend freely; their children will be blessed. —Psalm 37: 25-26

Each year when Advent and the Christmas season arrive, many memories of my childhood come to mind. I remember one Christmas in particular. I was probably 6 years old and I so wanted a doll bunkbed for my dolls. It was during the war, World War II, and metal was scarce so the toys were made of wood and quite expensive. I remember seeing the most beautiful wooden doll bunkbed in one of the toy departments while we were Christmas shopping and wishing as only a child's heart can do.

My mother would tuck us into bed on Christmas Eve and ask us what we wanted most from Santa. This was long before stores were open late on Christmas Eve, just in case. I told her most of all I wanted a doll bunkbed. Thank goodness it was dark as I'm sure her heart sank.

As no parent wants their child disappointed on Christmas morning, my Mom and Dad put their heads together and went to work. My Dad went out to his garage workshop in our backyard and from the scraps from his many projects created my doll bunkbed. Mom went to work at her sewing machine and made mattresses out of black and white ticking fabric she just happened to have on hand. Since there wasn't time for paint to dry, a note was attached from Santa for me to pick out whatever color I wanted. Needless to say, there was one happy little girl on Christmas morning. I picked a teal blue color and enjoyed many a day playing with my doll bunkbed.

I was an adult before I learned of this wonderful story of love, long after the bunkbed had been gifted to some other child. How I wish I still had this tangible reminder of the beautiful and unselfish love my parents bestowed on me that Christmas so very long ago! Such great love!

Gracious Father, I am reminded once again of the greatest love of all that you bestowed on us all that Christmas Eve so very long ago in the gift of your son Jesus, our Lord, Emmanuel. Amen.

Lenni Stickles

Sunday, December 31, 2023

The Yellow Leaf*Even in old age, they shall bear fruit. —Psalm 92:14*

I sat on the back porch and watched a yellow leaf gently, silently float down to the ground. One yellow leaf. Not even very big. But it had had a job to do, and it had done it well no matter its size. It had stayed on the tree and had provided a minuscule bit of shade to a square inch of earth below. Not important, some would say. He who created the DNA of that tiny leaf would disagree! That tiny leaf had joined thousands of other tiny leaves, and in conjunction, they had provided a natural umbrella of cooling, protective shade for the earth below.

But now...well, now the green had faded to yellow, and it had floated down for a new chapter in its purpose. It would decompose and provide rich nourishment for the soil below. Its work was not done, for in the legacy it would leave to a tiny square inch of ground, it would still have purpose...not to an entire acre of earth, but purpose for sure to an inch, just a tiny square inch of His world.

In our earthly realm of time, no one will point to that square inch of composted rich soil below and say, "Oh, look! This is where the tiny leaf lay and provided rich food for the earth!" No plaques or memorials for the tiny leaf would be built, but that tiny leaf had done its job well. It had completed its purpose, and the legacy, the rich legacy it would leave, would be the fertile soil for future tiny trees with countless more tiny leaves to grow toward heaven above.

Dear God, may I be a tiny leaf for You. May the legacy I leave be fertile soil to point others heavenward to You. In Jesus name I pray. Amen

"Bootsie" Johnston

They'd not seen it 'til then
 And its sudden appearance frightened the men.
 "Strange sights in the heavens mark strange deeds below,"
 Old Lemuel said, "as all of us know."
 "It's true," added Nat, "strange things on earth
 Like the death of a king or perhaps a birth."
 "Or war," put in Zeb. "We'll defend our home
 And send the invaders back to Rome."
 "Well," Lemuel said, "for the poor there'll be pain.
 For shepherds like us, there's nothing to gain."
 Young Ari said nothing; he didn't agree.
 He thought to himself, "They don't see what I see.
 The star tells of wonderful things to befall.
 It brings a message of hope for us all."

Guy Johnson



Tuesday, November 28, 2023

Saturday, December 30, 2023

What's in a Name

A child is born to us, a son is given to us, and authority will be on his shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be vast authority and endless peace for David's throne and for his kingdom, establishing and sustaining it with justice and righteousness now and forever.
—Isaiah 9: 6-7

When my husband John and I were expecting our first baby, we began – as many expectant parents do – to consider what we would name the baby. This was back in the day when ultrasound technology was just being developed, and ultrasounds were not common for routine pregnancies. I did not have one and we were ‘in the dark’ as to whether we would have a girl or a boy. John was very clear that he wanted to name our baby the name that he or she would be called: no nicknames for our child!! We chose the name James for a boy. And James is what we called him: not Jim, or Jimmy or Jay Jay or Jas or Jamus. James!

I remember very clearly a Sunday morning that James came with me on my circuit of three churches. He was about two years old. At the third church, after the service was over, one of the men in the church came up to us and said to James, “Hi there, Jimmy. It’s good to see you this morning.” James straightened himself up to his full three feet of height and very adamantly said, “My name is James!” As far as I know, no one has ever called him anything else.

I love this passage from the prophet Isaiah as he tells his readers who the coming Son, the Promised One will be. His name will be called: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. He has more than one name. These names are the foundation for our understanding of who Jesus is. They are the basis for knowing something about who the people should expect and what kind of Messiah God is sending. When I read these names for Jesus, I am filled with hope and joy. I am comforted by the knowledge of just who our Savior will be.

I might have only one name by which I call my older son, but I am truly glad that there are many names that help me understand who Jesus is.

Almighty God, thank you for sending Jesus to be with us. Thank you for the prophet Isaiah who gave us names to call our Messiah so that we can begin to understand who he is. Help us as we go through this Advent season to grow in knowledge, in faith and in our relationship to Jesus. Amen.

Rev. Marie Williams

Jesus, My Holdfast

I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. —John 15:5

Reading about lifeforms along Oregon’s Pacific coast, I encountered a word I had never seen before – “holdfast.” This term refers to the structures that attach seaweed to rocks or other hard material on the seabed. Kelp and other seaweeds give off spores which ultimately connect to something hard on the ocean floor and produce a holdfast before growing upwards through the water to the surface. The holdfast enables the plant to withstand turbulent waves and winter storms. Sea otters often wrap themselves in a strand of kelp and go to sleep confident that the kelp’s holdfast will keep them from being swept out to sea.

We humans put down roots of all sorts – hometown, family and friends, school, church and other institutions that claim our loyalty and devotion. At times I get homesick for the mountains of north Georgia. Certain smells remind me of my roots. The sound of wind through pines, the raucous calling of blue jays and the summer song of katydids call me home in my mind.

I know these things are part of my roots, but I have learned that they are not my holdfast. Jesus is that. He has helped me through many transitions in my life, good and bad. He is the one thing that allowed me to survive the loss of my husband. The turbulent waves and howling winds in my life have certainly threatened my peace and sense of well-being, but that strong and steady holdfast that is Jesus has kept me going and thriving in spite of the challenges.

Loving God, what a gift you have given us in your beloved son! As we celebrate once again the season of his birth, help us cling to the vine with steadfast intention and live into the abundant life that he wants for us. We are so very unworthy but we know that we are so loved! Amen.

Betty Schroeder

Friday, December 29, 2023

Wednesday, November 29, 2023

Don't Freeze

The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him. —Nahum 1:7

I received a small dirt bike when I was 13 years old. I remember learning how to ride it. That first day, I pulled the throttle wide open and popped a wheelie straight up, and I was so afraid that I couldn't let go, and the bike kept going. My dad told me to just let go, but I was frozen in fear. I barreled straight into a briar patch, scratching my arms, legs, and face. I walked out and my dad was there to comfort me. He helped clean me up and bandage me. If I had only trusted and let go, I wouldn't have crashed.

God, our savior, the redeemer, will give us each step. However, instead of listening to our Holy Father's direction, sometimes we freeze. We are so wrapped up in what is happening, we lose sight of the Almighty, who is there to lead us, to comfort us, to wash away our sins. We try to go it alone. Our Lord will never leave us nor forsake us. He sent his son to save you and me.

Lord Father, I thank you for being my lantern as I walk through the darkness of this world. Keep my faith strong and steadfast. I know there can be no other like you, and you will redeem us. I am a sinner and I am broken. But Lord, you never once turned away from me. I trust in you. I praise you, Father. I praise you! Amen.

Chris Golman

Room at the Inn or Vaiden Angels

Joseph went to the town of Bethlehem. While they were there, the time came for Mary to have the baby, and she gave birth to her first son. She wrapped the baby with cloths and laid him in a manger because there were no rooms in the inn. —Luke 2:4-7

Undoubtedly, angels were present when our station wagon broke down in Vaiden, Mississippi, on the way back from Iowa that Christmas Day. The old wagon coasted down the off-ramp and stopped just across from the gas station.

I sent Lois and the children to the café while I tried to fix the wagon. Sunset was not in my favor, so I joined the family.

We asked the waitress about a hotel and a repair shop. An older couple were listening, and Mary came over. "I couldn't help but overhear your conversation. Can we help?" she asked. She had spoken with her husband Harold, and they agreed we should stay with them at his hunting lodge because the immediate area was not safe.

So, we piled the children into their car and headed toward their lodge. We made our introductions and before long we learned that Mr. Smith was the former president of Baldwin Pianos and he had rewarded his top salespersons (and their spouses) with vacations around the world. As a music store owner, Lois's dad had been one of those salesmen and he and Lois's mom had accompanied Mr. Smith on several of these trips.

That Christmas night we slept in comfort and the next morning were treated to Mary's breakfast of eggs, fresh-baked biscuits, hashed browns, sausage, juice and coffee. Harold called some friends the night before who had had our station wagon towed to a repair shop—it would be fixed by 11 a.m. so we could continue our travels.

What a gift and what an encounter! Such generosity and love from these strangers and yet less than six degrees of separation. Was it happenstance, serendipity or divine intervention? Time would tell.

Upon return to Baton Rouge, Lois and I considered what gift we could send them to say thank you. We pondered and wrote a letter to Harold and Mary's hometown newspaper in Greenwood, Mississippi. The title of the letter—"Room at the Inn or Vaiden Angels." We recounted the generosity of the Smiths and their outpouring of gifts.

Later, Mary sent us a letter. "I could not believe how generous you were with your account of our meeting. In fact, I sat there and re-read it and cried. You and your family were more of a blessing to us than we could ever be to you. Before we offered "bed and breakfast" I said to Harold, "You never know when you are entertaining Angels unaware."

Awesome Creator. Thank you for the birth of your son Jesus and for all gifts both great and small. May the angels in heaven and on earth unite in one voice and resound, "AMEN"!

Steve Rushing

Thursday, November 30, 2023

Baby Names

Listen carefully: you will conceive in your womb and give birth to a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. —Luke 1:31

She will give birth to a Son, and you shall name Him Jesus (The Lord is salvation), for He will save His people from their sins. —Matthew 1:21

Before our first child was born, I spent many hours poring through baby name books, three or four books with thousands of names each. I was looking for the perfect name. My husband and I used to travel to Houston two to three times per month, so he was trapped in the car while I hashed and rehashed “our” favorite names. After months of study and review, we finally landed on the perfect names – one for a boy and one for a girl. A friend told me a few years later that the first year or two of his life, I never called our first born by the name that had been so laboriously selected. I called him “Babe” or “Baby.” I still do.

Mary did not spend hours choosing a name for her first born. The angels sent by God told her and Joseph that their son’s name would be Jesus, meaning deliverer or savior. It was a name that fit His purpose on Earth, to be the salvation for all believers, none of whom can consistently live the holy life demanded by God. We have our moments where we eagerly share the Fruits of the Spirit and follow the Greatest Commandment but then we stray off the path, sometimes in a series of one small steps and sometimes in one big leap. Because of our shortcomings, the Son of God took human form so that He could be the salvation of all people, our salvation. The birth of Jesus in the Christmas story leads us to the Easter story where His sacrifice for us fulfills the promise foretold by His name. With the fulfillment of that promise comes another promise. If we believe in Jesus and strive to live by the Word, we can get a new name: Child of God. As one of God’s Children, we can be assured that God loves us as a parent loves a child, guiding our path but understanding that there are times we wander. God is always there to welcome us back and help us get back on track.

With the birth of two more children, the baby name search was reinvigorated two more times. I frequently use nicknames for those two also – “K” and “To.” (I can imagine that in the quiet moments, Mary had a pet name for Jesus, maybe “Baby” or “Little One” or “J.”) The name we are given is important, but so is the name “Child of God” that is given to us as a believer.

Dear God, thank you for the salvation that You sent to us through Your son Jesus. Remind us even when we stray from our path that we are a Child of God. Amen

Susan Lambert

Ben Ezra listened, smiled politely, ate a hasty supper and decided he might be able to cover a few more miles of his journey before nightfall. As he walked along, Ben Ezra thought about the story he had heard at the inn. “How superstitious these country folk are,” he mused. “My sophisticated friends in Jerusalem could never believe such a thing. Still, that baby in Bethlehem will grow up among ordinary people. He will know the blessings and the pains of everyday life. He will learn the Law and the Prophets at his village synagogue. He will understand the needs of our people in a way that an earthly prince cannot. Perhaps those angels sang rightly. Perhaps I failed to see the Messiah. Could I have failed to recognize the savior of the world?”

Heavenly Father, open our minds and hearts to see your wonders. Help us to be free from our misconceptions. Amen.

Guy Johnson



Thursday, December 28, 2023

Friday, December 1, 2023

So Close!

At that time Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. —Matthew 11:25

In the days of Herod the King, the scribe Ben Ezra gave up his duties in Jerusalem and withdrew to the southern desert. His plan was to live as a hermit and to spend his remaining years in contemplation of the sacred scriptures of his people.

Ben Ezra wished to turn his thoughts away from what he saw in the city: the greed of the wealthy, the deprivations of the poor, and the oppression of all by the harsh invading Romans. But he could not forget the stories he had so often heard of a Messiah, one sent by God to free Israel and establish a kingdom of righteousness and justice.

Ben Ezra knew that his countrymen expected a mighty warrior who would drive out their enemies with force, bloodshed and violence. Still, he thought, no military commander in history had managed to establish a lasting realm of peaceful stability and prosperity for all. "No," he thought, "our Messiah won't be just a soldier." Would the Messiah perhaps be a great prophet declaring God's will persuasively to the people? Ben Ezra thought of the many prophets rejected by those who would not listen, persecuted by those who feared them.

Similarly, Ben Ezra concluded that no scholar, no artist, no musician, no builder could hope to remake the minds of their listeners. Ben Ezra was unable to imagine for himself what sort of man the Messiah might be.

After many months in the desert, Ben Ezra began to feel a longing to see his old friends in Jerusalem. Perhaps they could clarify his thinking about the Messiah. He gathered a few possessions and set out toward Jerusalem.

The journey was long and difficult. Ben Ezra walked the rocky roads for many days. One morning close to midday, he chanced upon a small town. He made his way to the inn in the town square in search of a meal and a night's lodging. The common room of the inn was crowded with town's people excitedly talking with one another. Ben Ezra asked what the cause of concern might be. A diner replied, "We're all here to catch a glimpse of the blessed baby." The previous night, he added, shepherds from the hills had come into town saying angels had appeared to them announcing the birth of the Messiah. They had hurried down to the inn and found a newborn babe and his parents. Everyone in town soon heard the news and all wanted to see the child.

Emanuel - God With Us

The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (Emmanuel) - which means, God with us. —Matthew 1:23

When I hear the name Emmanuel, it sends me back to my teenage years. Our Associate Pastor, Emanuel E. Holmberg, often met with and led the Sunday School Class for the teens at our Oklahoma City Methodist church. His quiet smile and kind demeanor made a lasting impression. He never raised his voice or preached a brimstone sermon to my knowledge. We knew he had served as a chaplain in WWII, but he never dwelled on it with the youth. I am not sure why he is such a big part of my memories except that he embodied the love of Christ to all he met.

In the early 1970s when I was in high school, Rev. Emanuel Holmberg was already in his early 60's. He had served as the pastor in several small towns in Oklahoma after attending OCU and Garrett Biblical Institute for his Bachelor of Divinity. Then came WWII and at age 35, with a wife and two small children, he volunteered to be a Chaplain in the U.S. Army in Europe. Upon returning to Oklahoma after the war as an even more spiritual pastor, he served in five more churches until nearing retirement, he came to OKC as an Associate Pastor at my church. He served a total of 62 years as a Methodist pastor. All of these facts are just details, but his ministry remains a part of my heart and he truly embodies his name – God With Us.

Rev. Emanuel Edward Holmberg – 1906 to 1996.

*Lord, thank you for the Saints who came before us. We never know what impact we will have on those we encounter. I pray that I can be your servant to those I meet.
Amen*

Carol Marr Gordon

Saturday, December 2, 2023

Wednesday, December 27, 2023

Hope

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. —Jeremiah 29:11

For those who believe in Jesus Christ, there is always the HOPE of Eternal Life. That is why He came to earth so that we might have life in Him forever.

For those who have family members living with mental illness, hope often seems to be on a far flung planet. They look at their family member and grieve for what was or what might have been. Family members may be called every name in the book or have holes punched in the walls of their home or even have violence done against them by their ill family member. The one with the illness may steal money or take a car and drive to a distant state because the voices in their head told them to do so. While all of this is happening, the family has given up any hope they might have had of having a life that looks like other families' lives. They feel all alone and because of stigma may not choose to tell anyone of the diagnosis of mental illness.

At NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) we will never give up HOPE. We let family members know that there are others who have had the same or similar experiences. Mental health is part of physical health, and there is no stigma in admitting to a person's having a brain disorder. We teach communication skills and self-care for the family so that they can make living with the ill family member easier. We teach that recovery is possible even though it may not look the same as before the person got ill. There is hope for a better family life and a positive future.

During this season of Christian HOPE, let us remember there is indeed hope for those living with mental illness and for their families.

Father of HOPE, be with those whose families have been disrupted by mental illness. Let them know that HOPE is possible and let them know of the hope of eternal life. Be with them through their struggles and let them know the peace that passes understanding in YOU. Amen

Daphne G. Grady

Sunday, December 3, 2023

Amahl and the Night Visitors

"I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "...plans to give you hope and a future." —Jeremiah 29:11

Expectantly, I lean forward as lights come up, revealing a makeshift stage. A little shepherd boy sits outside a simple dwelling, playing a flute. Inside, his mother sweeps a dirt floor.

Jesus Is My Rock

The Lord Is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower. —Psalm 18:2

Cancer has presented me with many uncertainties. I am so thankful to have Jesus as my rock. Knowing that Jesus is always there for me, to guide me in decision making, to comfort me when I feel bad, to calm my fears, to give me strength to face what's ahead, gives me a sense of confidence and peace. He is steadfast. He is my protector. He does not change.

As a reminder of Jesus as my rock, I have found wearing a rosary from Medjugoire given to me by a dear neighbor helpful. Wearing it around my wrist allows me to clasp the plain, wooden cross in the palm of my hand at any time as I go about my day. In addition, I have found my larger Holding Cross so comforting at night. The wood is smooth, solid with no sharp edges and lets me know I am not alone. Both give me the reassurance needed that Jesus is watching over me.

No matter what challenges we face, know that Jesus is our rock. Trust in the Lord and know that He is good.

*Thank you, Jesus, for your humble birth.
Thank you, Jesus, for your suffering so that I could be saved.
Thank you, Jesus, for being my rock in times of uncertainty.*

Harriet Walters



Tuesday, December 26, 2023

Light of the World

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. —John 8:12

The stars shone bright against the black of the moonless Maine night. The songs of summer frogs echoed over the glass-smooth water of the inlet. It felt like one of the thin places that I have experienced several times in my life – a place where the earthly and divine almost touch, a place where the presence of the Creator is palpable. My heart warred between an overwhelming sense of peace and rightness and an underlying pulse of excitement.

When I finally dipped the kayak paddle into the black stillness of the water, my senses almost exploded with awe at the glittering stream of tiny lights that followed the stroke of the paddle. Each swirl from the eddy of the paddle thrust produced a luminous path of light from hundreds of bioluminescent plankton.

I was overwhelmed by surprise and humility at the beauty in front of me. A comforting warmth spread over my entire body. I knew that I was experiencing the presence of God through his amazing creation.

I can still call to mind the blackness of the water and the sky and the beautiful light of the stars and the tiny sea life. Light speaks to us, calls us to life, encourages and comforts us. And we have the gift of the ultimate light – the light of Jesus.

Come, let us celebrate His arrival once again!

God of all creation, the darkness of black winter swaddles the earth. Silently we kneel in expectant solitude, awaiting the light like the caterpillar in its chrysalis. Holy darkness rains into our hearts showers of longing, floods of yearning. And still we wait in faith, in hope, watching for the coming of the dawning light that will flood us with the warmth of new awakenings, new beginnings, and new life. Come, Light of the World! Come, sweet Jesus, come! Amen.

Betty Schroeder

I am seeing for the first time Menotti's one-act opera *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. I am fourteen years old. To be sure, this is a low-budget production. The "stage" is actually the platform of University Presbyterian Church in Baton Rouge. The set (the shepherd's hut) is depicted only by a rustic table and a bench. The door to the hut is imagined.

There is no orchestra. Only a piano provides the accompaniment. And the shepherd boy isn't a boy. The role is being sung by a petite young woman—a lyric soprano.

But none of this matters. To me, the production is magical. As the opera advances, I will learn that the little shepherd is crippled and that three Wise Men will visit the boy's hut that very night--to rest on their way to Bethlehem. The plot unfolds rapidly. The Wise Men will fall asleep. The mother will attempt to steal gold from these visitors—until she learns that the gold is meant for a special child born this very night in Bethlehem. The mother and her son Amahl are among the poorest of the poor, yet Amahl wishes to give a gift of his own to this child. He offers to give his crutch. As he takes it from under his arm and presents it to the Wise Men, the music dies to just above a whisper. Amahl, hardly believing, looks down at his feet. Slowly he sings, "I walk, mother. I walk..."

Through the years, I've seen this little opera many times. But I will always look for a chance to see it again when Christmas rolls around, and for this simple reason: Amahl has come to symbolize everything that Christmas means to me—love, forgiveness, and healing.

In a very real way, the little boy Amahl is now a part of me. I have passed through a lifetime of hopes held high and dreams dashed, unbridled joys and cruel disappointments. The opera ends as Amahl joins the Wise Men on their journey toward Bethlehem. The audience delights in this glorious finale. But time and again, I will go back to witness this little opera, not for the ending, but for the instant right before Amahl is healed...the moment "just before," when Amahl is simply offering his own gift to the Christ child. This is my "Amahl Moment."

In my seventies now, I've lived so many of my days just waiting, stranded in those moments "just before." And there are, I know, so many of those "just before" moments yet to come. But the beautiful strains of Menotti's opera will stir again. Lights will again come up on a poor shepherd's hut. The Wise Men will appear. And as Amahl offers his simple gift, I know that there will always come--in that very next moment--a miracle.

Dear Lord, whatever the present circumstances, I know You are always with me, leading me into the promise of a bright tomorrow.

Terry Byars

Advent Candle Lightings For Home

Love: Week of December 3

In the second week of Advent we remember the gift of Love we have in Christ. Jesus shows us God's perfect love. He is God's love in human form. The Bible says that, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Later, Jesus tells his disciples, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13).

As we light this candle, we remember that we are called to love like Christ loves us and demonstrate that love in the way we treat others.

Light two purple candles.

Reflect: How have you experienced love this week?

Loving God, we thank you for your gift of love, shown to us perfectly in Jesus. Help us prepare our hearts for Christmas by loving others as Christ loves us. We ask this in the name of the one born in Bethlehem, Jesus, our loving Savior. Amen.



We have been given the gift of God's love in Jesus, and now it its time to share it. Will you sing? God is waiting. A Savior has been born! He is indeed the long-expected one, the Messiah, our Lord - Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, Emmanuel.

This good news makes my heart sing, "God is with us!"

Merry Christmas!

Emmanuel, you come to us as a baby and bring with you the gift of love and new life. Help us as we share this good news with the world. Amen.

Rev. Lane Cotton Winn



Monday, December 25, 2023

Monday, December 4, 2023

Will You Sing?

The angel said, "Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you – wonderful, joyous news for all people. Your savior is born today in David's city. He is Christ the Lord. This is a sign for you: you will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great assembly of the heavenly forces was with the angel praising God. They said, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" —Luke 2:10-14

There's a beautiful old Christmas legend that tells of how God called the angels together one day for a special choir rehearsal. God told them that there was a special song for them to learn – a song that they would sing at a very significant occasion.

The angels went to work on it. They rehearsed long and hard, with great focus and intensity. In fact, some of the angels grumbled a bit, but God insisted on a very high standard for this choir.

As time passed, the choir improved. Their tone and rhythm were blending beautifully. Finally, God announced that they were ready!

But then, God shocked them with this bit of news. God told them that there would be just one performance of this great song they had worked on so diligently.

Again, some of the angels grumbled. The song was so extraordinarily beautiful and they had it down pat now. Surely, they could sing it many, many times.

God simply smiled and told them that when the time came they would understand.

Finally the day arrived. God called them together and gathered them above a field just outside of Bethlehem. "It's time," God said to them, and the angels sang their song. "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace and goodwill to all!"

As the angels sang, they knew there would never be another night like this. There would never be another birth like this birth in Bethlehem.

When the angels returned to heaven, God reminded them that they would not formally sing that song again as an angelic choir, but if they wanted to, they could hum the song to themselves.

One angel was bold enough to step forward and ask God, "Why? Why could they not sing that majestic anthem again? They did it so well. It felt so right. Why couldn't they sing that great song anymore?"

"Because," God explained, "my son has been born... and now earth must do the singing!"

A Star Shone Over Bethlehem - A Star of Love

Caleb came up to the shop before noon
To ask if his job would be finished soon.
The carpenter answered, "It's almost done.
Come in, my friend, don't stand in the sun.
Here is your wagon good as new,
Ready to go many miles for you."
"It soon will have many miles to go.
Our Roman masters would have it so.
Joseph," said Caleb, "it's certain that no man
Ever has encountered a good-natured Roman.
Look at their faces, harsh and grim.
They take what's ours on the slightest whim.
Having a census? Well, okay that's fine,
But why do I have to go to sign
The rolls in a town where I've never been
Because it was once the home of my kin?"
Joseph answered, "It's hard, I know,
Down to Bethlehem we must go,
Mary and I and the time draws near-
In just a few days our child will be here.
We have our old donkey for her to ride
But I haven't anything else to provide
For safety and comfort along the way.
We have to go but we need to stay!
I'm worried for her. The trip is so long,
So filled with danger, so much can go wrong."
"Stop, stop," said Caleb, "you're overwrought.
Be calm, my friend, I have a thought.
Look at the wagon you've fixed for me.
It's certainly big enough for three.
Just listen before you deny my claim
For most of the journey our paths are the same.
In the wagon on cushions Mary may rest.
My horses will pull us, two of the best.
I'll be the driver. You can decide
Whether you want to walk or ride."

Sunday, December 24, 2023

“Thank you,” said Joseph, “that offer is more
 Than any friend could be hoping for.
 Mary and I will talk, and if she
 Thinks well of your plan we will agree.”

When the matter was settled, plans were laid,
 Provisions gathered, old debts repaid.
 At last at dawn on a chilly day
 The trip of the three was underway,
 With Mary at ease in the wagon bed
 And Joseph acting as driver instead
 Of Caleb who happily cheered them along
 Playing his flute or singing a song.
 They traveled all day. They camped that night
 By the side of the roadway just out of sight.
 Hidden they hoped by the thicket of trees
 That lined their path, they rested at ease
 And savored the porridge that Mary brewed
 While horses and donkeys foraged for food.
 They slept quite soundly through the night
 And set out again at the dawn’s first light.

Caleb was driving on that day’s ride
 While Joseph was sitting at Mary’s side.
 They talked together of many a thing:
 Their hopes for their child, what the future might bring.
 Then Mary said, “Last night in my bed
 I suddenly awoke and saw overhead
 A wondrously beautiful golden star,
 Brighter than any around it by far.
 And I was enfolded by its glow
 And felt the love it was sent to bestow
 On me and you and all we know.”
 “The star is a blessing,” said Joseph “and we
 Will watch together tonight and see.
 There in the heavens high above
 This wonderful star, this star of love.”
 And as they traveled every night
 They searched the sky for this heavenly sight.

The Light of the World

Then Jesus spoke to them again, saying, “I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.”—John 8:12

As I think about the birth of Jesus, I consider how the shepherds must have felt when they saw the star shining in the night sky – the light illuminating a celestial being with the most wonderful news, then suddenly joined by others glorifying God for a gift so precious none can compare to it.

What would have I done? How would I have felt? Would I have fallen in fear or jumped with delight?

I hope and pray that I would have been like the shepherds: running to see this glorious gift of salvation from God. Praise God for sharing His gift with such a lowly person as me. What a privilege to behold the baby with his mother in a stable and realize that God cares for everyone, even me. How beautiful! How wonderful! How amazing! Welcome Child of Light! Illuminate our hearts.

Dear God, thank you for Jesus, the light of the world. Shine your light on us this Christmas season and forevermore. In Jesus’ name, amen

L. Darlene Dickson

Advent Candle Lightings For Home

Light of Christ: Week of Christmas

Today we celebrate the gift of the Incarnation. We celebrate the birth of the Christ child, who is the Light of the World. Jesus, the Son of God, lived among us, experiencing our joys and hopes, our struggles and challenges. He came to show us how to walk in God’s wonderful, eternal Light.

As we light the Christ candle, we remember this holy truth, that “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14)

Light all five candles.

Reflect: What non-tangible gift have you received this Advent and Christmas?

Light of the World, we thank you for the mystery of the Incarnation. May we live as those who allow hope, love, joy, and peace guide our lives. Help us receive the Light of Christ in our hearts and share it generously and joyfully in our lives and communities. We ask this in the name of the one born in Bethlehem, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Saturday, December 23, 2023

A Light for Others

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourself. Do what it says.
—James 1:22

It was Christmas Day afternoon when I received a call from a young man whom I had seen in a counseling situation. He had been struggling in many areas of his life and sought spiritual counsel. I had not heard from him in a while.

“I am so sorry to call you on Christmas Day, but I would like to bring you a gift. It is really important for me to give it to you today. Is that possible?”

“Sure.” And I gave him my home address.

In a short while he appeared at my doorstep with a new copy of the book “A Road Less Traveled” in hand. We had used some quotes from the book as fodder for our discussions. I had loaned him my book to read. I had forgotten he still had it.

“I want to give you a new copy of this book as I have marked the one you loaned me with notes. I hope you don’t mind. It is my way of saying ‘thanks’ for spending time with me. I am on my way to celebrate Christmas with all my family—my wife and kids. Without our conversations and prayers I would have walked away from the gift I have in them! Thank you!”

As he gave me the book, he hugged me!

“Proud of you! What a great Christmas present!” I said as he walked away.

One of the precious moments when you realize what you do matters!

Good morning Lord! As I go through this day help me to realize what I do matters. Slow me down during this holiday season to encourage those who are struggling on life. Help us all to value relationships more than things. Then we will discover the great gifts we have—given by you. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

Rev. Dr. M. Jack O’Dell



At last came the time when Bethlehem lay
Only the walk of a morning away.
It’s hard to say good-bye to a friend
But earthly journeys have an end.
Caleb drove east with a cheerful “good day!”
Mary and Joseph knelt to pray.
Then rising they prepared to go
To Bethlehem traveling steady and slow
On their donkey Mary would ride
With Joseph walking along at her side.
What the future would bring neither could say.
The star of love pointed their way.

Guy Johnson



Tuesday, December 5, 2023

Friday, December 22, 2023

Getting Old

Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life. —Proverbs 16:31

As a friend was celebrating her milestone birthday of 70 years, she said that 70 is the new 40. Everyone laughed. That particular friend goes over and beyond and certainly does not seem to be "OLD."

I have passed several milestone birthdays. I do not feel old most of the time. Where did the time go? How did my son get to be as old as he is? He was only a baby a few months ago. How could I have possibly been married for so long? Our wedding was not that long ago.

Now, when I tried to skip a few months ago and could not get off the ground, I felt old. That was so easy before, and I always had fun skipping. Several months later, I tried to hop and could not do that. I figured it was because I had so much weight to lift and did not want to think it was because of the date of my birth. I cannot open the caps on water bottles some days. It pains me to think that I have lost that much strength in my hands.

My husband has told me several times recently that we are old. I asked him not to say that, even though it is true. We cannot learn to scuba dive because of the calendar, and we cannot do on a cruise what we did thirty years ago. We have learned to take many things much slower than we have previously done. Naps were always appreciated, but now they come at unexpected times and sometimes unintentionally.

Through it all, God has been a constant in my life. He has been there for all those birthdays and ordinary days. God's LOVE is ever present whether we are a newborn babe or a woman with a crown of gray hair. God's LOVE will never be taken away even if other feelings or abilities become diminished or disappear altogether. God loves us all very much.

As this Christian season of LOVE is upon us, remember to show God's LOVE to all that you meet whether they have aged out or not.

Father of us all, continue to love us, no matter what color our hair is or even if we do not have hair. Let us show that love to others whom we meet each day. Guide us in your way of Love. Amen

Daphne G. Grady

The Many Names of Christ

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. —Isaiah 9:6

Names are very important to human beings. They were important to Jesus as well. He is called by many names like Messiah, Lord, Savior and Emmanuel. He is the Light of the World, the Prince of Peace and the Word made flesh. He is also the Good Shepherd and the Bread of Life. Redeemer, Son of Man, Everlasting Father, and King of the Jews are also His name.

My name is Daphne (daf-nee). It has been pronounced dol-fin, daf-any, daf-a-nee, dap-hi-ne, and daf-fy. My mother's name was also Daphne. Her mother saw the name in a book and liked it. Since my mother was born and raised in Mississippi her friends and family called her Dafna. In fact she spelled her name Daphna until she took Latin in high school. Her teacher told her she was misspelling her name. When she asked my grandmother, Mom told her that the correct spelling was Daphne.

I have other names as well. My family calls me D. Gay. My sister and brother and I have rhyming middle names, and we were called by our double names. My sister could not say Daphne Gay so she came up with D. Gay.

My son, Paul Grady Madden, calls me Mama or Mother. His friends at the dance studio called me Ms. Paul Grady because they knew I was his mother. I have been called Aunt Daphne by my nieces. Some people call on the phone and ask to speak to Mrs. Madden. I previously was able to tell them that she lived in Shreveport, since I do not go by my husband's name. I have been called a scouter, a substitute teacher, a pre-school music teacher, a bell ringer or a ding a ling, a friend, a wife, a mother, a sister, and a child.

The name I want to be known as above all names is a Child of God. I want people to be able to call me the name of Christian because of the way I represent Christ's light in my life. Yes, I am not perfect, but if I continue to strive for Christ's Light to shine through me, I will eventually be perfected in Him.

Light of Christ, shine in my life. Make me true to the name Christian. Let others see your light through my actions. Thank you for that light and for everlasting life. Amen

Daphne G. Grady

Thursday, December 21, 2023

Wednesday, December 6, 2023

The Gift of Advent

My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And he is the propitiation for our sins: not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world. —1 John 2: 1-2

The very season of Advent sparks anticipation, anxiety, and eagerness. The very word means “important arrival,” “a coming, approach, arrival.” In the times when darkness threatens to overtake us, we pray and anticipate an answer, a clearing, a relief. Indeed, we await the arrival of our advocate, the divine intercessor, for whom no darkness is too wide or deep.

Just as the Magi traveled in anticipation of the Christ child, we too are traveling this Advent journey from confusion, seeking the light and the truth, Jesus’ revelation. Just as the Magi were guided by the star, a light in the sky, may the Holy Spirit be the light within us, bringing us closer to Christ.

In the period of waiting, anticipation, praying, we have faith the greatest shepherd will find us, remove the distractions, and bring us safely back into the flock. Advent, the time we commemorate the arrival of God’s greatest gift. Advent is the season of waiting, the season of hope, the season of faith.

This season is also a test of faith, and as we wait with unceasing prayer, I am reminded of one of the songs my great-grandmother used to sing. A lyric says “Wait on the Lord and be of good courage,” which she often followed with “God might not come when you want Him but He’s always on time.”

The time was Christmas, and it was the coming of Jesus. Let us rejoice.

Most gracious God, thank you for the gift of your son Jesus. In this season, when every heart should be light, many are under a shadow of despair, fear, and hopelessness. We need Jesus more than ever, and this Advent we await the promised rest for the weary, peace for the anxious, and comfort for the lost, lonely, and forgotten. In this Advent season of expectation, let our worship echo throughout the community and bring more people to You. Finally, we pray all God’s children from the cradle to rocker be reminded the greatest Christmas gift is not wrapped in pretty paper; it is not under a tree, nor is it a package delivered to the door. The greatest gift of Christmas is love, Jesus Christ who descended from heaven and whose name we pray, amen.

Angeletta KM Gourdine

Savior, Jesus

She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. —Matthew 1:21

Love – everybody wants it and everyone needs it. We look for love from our parents, spouses, children and friends. Some even look for love from strangers on social media. We all search for love; it doesn’t matter if you’re young or old. Love is a vital part of human existence. When a person is deprived of love it’s hard for them to love others as well as themselves.

We are all loved by God our Father yet so many of us haven’t experienced His unconditional love. When I encounter a child who’s difficult to deal with, I ask God to allow His love to shine through me straight to their little heart. As time goes on I’ll see a change. It might be small but God’s love is at work.

Praise God for his amazing love for us. When man sinned, He had a plan for our redemption. God sent his son as a special gift of love. Praise God for Jesus our Savior.

Dear God, Thank you for loving us so much that you gave your one and only son to save the world. In Jesus’ name, amen

L. Darlene Dickson



Thursday, December 7, 2023

Wednesday, December 20, 2023

A Friend of God

Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends; You are my friends if you do what I command. —John 15:13-14

You shall love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind, and with all your strength. —Mark 12:30-31

The writer asks us to consider “What kind of love a man would have to lay down his life for a friend?” This sort of Agape love can only be described as amazing! Jesus, having this kind of love for his bride, the church, laid down his life for us all. Laid down. His life was not taken. The almighty God that created heaven and earth came to us in the form of a babe born of a virgin. He certainly could have called 10,000 angels to defeat the ones that nailed him to the cross. God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit know the end of everything from the beginning. Therefore, knowing that only the precious blood of Christ could save us from condemnation, He laid down His life willingly, while we were yet in sin.

This brings me to ask, are we then, truly ‘friends’ of God? Jesus laid down His life for a friend, but how many of us would be willing to do that? I’m the first to admit that although I try, I am not always holding up my end of the friendship at all. We meet our secular friends for coffee, make dinner reservations far in advance. We ‘friend’ people on Facebook all day long or send a thoughtful tweet throughout the day, just because. We bestow our friends with our time, respect, pour resources into them, and give them our love. How have you loved God today? This friendship is in many ways very one-sided. We are asked to fellowship, pray, read our Bible and to spread the good news. REALLY... IT’S NOT HARD:

- Fellowship-go to church (You will be welcomed, encouraged, fed, and missed.)
- Pray-talk to God (How else can we stay connected to our heavenly father?)
- Read the Bible (It’s literally a roadmap for every one of life’s little or big nuances.)
- Spread the Good News (Testimony Time! Simply talk about what He’s done, what you’re expecting, about His goodness.)

To be a friend of God is to love Him. I’ve found that putting God first in my life is the easiest way to walk the straight and narrow. Many say to err is human. For some of us with challenging pasts, errors are an everyday occurrence. The grace of God keeps me grounded, His forgiveness and grace keep me going. Trials and tribulations come daily, but I’ve found that I can always receive enough grace for today. Everyday. And it is sufficient for me to continue walking this walk. I am a friend of God.

Lord, please help us to be friends of you. Thank you for your love, grace, and peace that you so freely bestow upon us each and every day. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Mecah Idikwu

Shalom

Shalom I leave with you. My shalom I give to you; not as the world gives, give I to you. Don’t let your heart be troubled, neither let it be fearful. —John 14:27

Shalom to you now, shalom, my friends. May God’s full mercies bless you, my friends. In all your living and through your loving, Christ be your shalom, Christ be your shalom.

After Hurricane Katrina, our house was under one of the flight paths for the Black Hawk helicopters flying from Independence Park to New Orleans and back. The whirring of the blades was so strong that if we were in the backyard when they flew over, it felt as though we could feel them in our chest. The days after Katrina were and still are a blur. The fear, worry, and energy were palpable. The need for clothing, money, support, food, and shelter was overwhelming. News footage and personal stories from friends and students were heartbreaking and at times fear inducing. There were drives for food, clothing, and the librarian at school was curating a list of people who could possibly offer temporary shelter. There were literally many voices crying for help, and the desire to help was paralyzing; there was little if any peace to be found.

One morning while working in the backyard and after seeing, hearing, and feeling the convoy of Blackhawks overhead, I was praying for each pilot as they flew over and for each person they would come in contact with that day. The hymn *Shalom to You* popped into my head. As the words were sung, **absolutely** nothing and yet **absolutely** everything changed. For the duration of that season, if I were by myself when the helicopters flew over, I would sing the hymn. If I was around anyone (out of respect for their hearing ☺) I would pray the hymn.

Since those days we have faced many life-altering events, and every time the words “Shalom to You” bubble to my consciousness, **absolutely** nothing and yet **absolutely** everything changes.

In this season of Advent, my friend in all your living and through your loving, Christ be your shalom, Christ be your shalom.

Dear Heavenly Father, Thank you. Thank you for your gift of peace that surpasses all understanding. In Jesus’ name, Amen

Rhonda Tucker

Tuesday, December 19, 2023

Friday, December 8, 2023

What is Peace?

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. —John 14:27

Peace comes in many forms. The challenge is recognizing the moment of peace when it gets there. Peace can be found walking in the woods with the sounds of nature all around you. Peace could be stepping into the house after a long stressful day. Peace could be sitting on the back of a truck waiting for the police to show up after a little ole lady has beaten you with her walking stick because you were parked in the handicapped slot. Upon realizing that you have done nothing wrong you are at peace. Peace can be found 35 feet below water where you can just relax and enjoy the splendor of being underwater. These are just a few examples of what peace could be.

Speaking as a combat Veteran, finding the moments of peace were important to me to keep my sanity. You cannot be on a knife-edge without dulling the ability to perform. Peace comes in all shapes and sizes as well. You have those moments of peace when you step into the cool of the house. Or those big moments where everything finally clicks into place and all your hard work pays off. Peace is a gift that allows you to re-focus and re-center. Without peace I would not want to be around because then you have nothing to look forward to. Peace in all its shapes, forms, and moments is a blessing and a gift.

Stop and think about the last time you allowed peace to bring you ease and comfort. Spend the day looking for those tiny moments. Do not always go rushing from thing to thing. And welcome the peace in when it appears, and enjoy the gift that it brings.

Lord, allow me to see the peace when it comes and know it for what it means. Amen

Paul Grady Madden



Distinguishing Love

Love is patient, love is kind, it isn't jealous, it doesn't brag, it isn't arrogant, it isn't rude, it doesn't seek its own advantage, it isn't irritable, it doesn't keep a record of complaints, it isn't happy with injustice, but it is happy with the truth.

—1 Corinthians 13:4-7

The indigenous Inuit community from the northwest region of North America has over 50 words for different types of snow. Living in a colder climate, snow is part of their daily lives, their routines, their entire existence. The Inuits must have realized at some point the differences between the types of snow. Distinguishing between the different types must have also been important. One type of snow might be better for building structures than other types. One type of snow might be more treacherous to walk on than other types. The abundance of snow and its various forms call for the use of distinct, identifying words. The Inuits have over 50 names for snow because their livelihood and existence rely so strongly upon it.

Christians have many different names for Jesus, even more if you count all the names for God and the Holy Spirit (you know...the Trinity being three-in-one and all). It makes sense to have different names for the central focus of our lives and our livelihood, much like the Inuits having different names for snow. Jesus' various names refer to the various roles he plays in our lives. He is a Redeemer, forgiving us and providing us with an opportunity to forgive ourselves; he is a Prince of Peace, bringing calm and patience to chaotic or violent situations; he is a Counselor, the one who listens to us and comforts us. He is the Cornerstone of our faith and of our lives, which calls for the use of distinct, identifying words.

The St. John's youth group is currently making their way through a Bible study that discusses all the different Greek words for love. The Greeks of Jesus' time used at least seven distinct words for love – storge, agape, philia, eros, ludos, pragma, and philautia. Love must have been very important to Greek society during this era. Why else would they find the need to distinguish between different types of love? It also makes me wonder...does our society, which does not have many different words for love, value love as much?

We may not be able to change our society's view or value of love, but maybe we can start with ourselves and our church. We should challenge ourselves to value love above all other things. We first have to develop a strong understanding and distinction of what love is, though.

Reflecting over the following scriptures might help us better value and appreciate love in our lives, as they provide a very clear distinction of what love is.

Scriptures for Reflection: Matthew 22:36-40; 1 John 4:7-21; and 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Lord Jesus, help us to value love the way you've instructed us to. Help us to seek and share love in all we do. Let us show love to others so that they might also learn to value it in their lives. Help us to change the hearts of those around us to be more focused on love above all else. And change our own hearts too, Lord, if we fail to hold love in its rightful place. Love's rightful place is at the center of our lives. Let us not forget that in all we do, especially in what we do for the sake of your name. Amen.

Connor Dean

Saturday, December 9, 2023

By What Name Am I Known?

See what great love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God! —1 John 3:1

Most of us know who we were named for, i.e. a family member, a special friend or perhaps just a favorite name. This is our legal name which identifies us. We all have other multiple names or titles that further describe who we are. These names are more specific and have certain expectations and behaviors associated with them. Of course, we don't all have the same collection of names/titles, but there are overlaps. For example, you and I may share several of the following: mother, wife, grandparent, sister, educator, gardener, volunteer, octogenarian, Methodist, retiree, friend and neighbor.

There is, however, one name that we all share—Child of God. According to 1 John, this is a name given to all of us by our Father. As a Child of God, what are the expectations that come with that name? Do my actions and behavior reflect those characteristics that would be associated with being called a Child of God? Would my Father be pleased? Am I pleased? Do I deserve to be called a Child of God?

Let us take time during this holy season to reflect on the implications of being known as a Child of God. Let us ponder what more we can do to live up to the expectations that come with this name bestowed on us by our Heavenly Father. We should ask ourselves, “Can I,” “Should I,” “Must I,” do more? Where do I start?

Remember that Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called Children of God.” Giving serious thought to what it means to be known as a peacemaker just might be a good starting point for us, as we make a more vigorous effort to live up to being called a Child of God, regardless of where we are in our spiritual journey.

Heavenly Father, help me to live a life so that I am worthy of being called a Child of God. Amen

Claudia Fowler

I've never heard that they come and go
But there's much in the world I do not know.
“Does it have a name or a story to tell?”
“Let us sit here a moment and study it well.
It may have a secret it's willing to share.
It may speak if it knows a listener is there.”

“I'm listening and looking and I see
The new star is brightest of all to me.
The other stars' light is icy and cold;
The new starlight sparkles warm and gold.
It makes me feel happy to sit here below
And rest in the calm of warming glow.”
“It's a peaceful star,” old Martha said,
“Now let us go in and back to bed.”
“But we haven't found a name for the star!”
“Others will study it wiser by far
And perhaps find the name.” “But as for me
The star of peace it will always be.”
“You are right, my child, cares and worries cease
When we sit below this star of peace.”

Guy Johnson



A Star Shone Over Bethlehem - A Star of Peace

On Bethany fell the new star's light,
 But only one was awake that night.
 Old Martha, restless, had left her bed
 And gone out to sit in the garden instead.
 Silently past the room she had crept
 Where baby Mary and young Martha slept.
 The sharp night air was a cooling balm.
 Wrapped in her blanket she soon grew calm.
 Troubling memories slipped away
 Along with the pains of the present day.
 But then came a voice to disturb her ease,
 A little voice saying, "Grandmother, please
 Come back inside. The wind is chill.
 The cold night air will make you ill."

"Young Martha, my dear," her grandmother said,
 "Thank you for caring. You should be abed."
 "I was worried, you know," the young girl replied.
 "Come under my cloak then and sit at my side.
 We'll share a few stories, then go in to rest."
 "I love to hear stories and yours are the best!"
 "We'll talk about stars. Your grandfather knew
 All the star stories and I'll tell them to you.

He taught me their names and the pictures they make.
 Look! There is the hunter, you cannot mistake;
 Three stars make his belt, his sword are two more,
 His dogs run before him across heaven's floor.
 Then to the north two bears there will be
 That circle the star that guides sailors at sea."

"But grandma," asked Martha, "what is the name
 Of the bright star above us that glows like a flame?"
 "My child," asked old Martha, "what star do you mean?"
 She looked up, "Why, I've never seen
 Such a beautiful star! It seems quite new."
 "Do stars ever change?" "I suppose they do.

Fruitcakes

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." —Luke 2: 10-11

To some, fruitcake is a Christmas favorite. To others, fruitcake is something to be avoided at all costs. If you are a connoisseur of fruitcake, you know that there seems to be as many fruitcake recipes as there are fruitcake bakers. (If you are not a connoisseur – just take my word for it.) Fruit cake is an odd food item. Is it a dessert? Or is it a snack? Is it cake or bread? It contains nuts like walnuts or pecans or Brazil nuts, dried fruits like raisins or dates, and candied fruits like cherries or pineapple. The chunky, chewy morsels are either surrounded by a dense cake or bound by just enough dough to glue the ingredients together. Stored correctly, they can be kept for months. Loaves or rings of fruit cake are often gifted. And yet, fruit cake is the root of many jokes. It isn't one of the mainstream Christmas goodies like fudge, divinity, Christmas cookies, or gingerbread. It is different.

It is not always easy for us to embrace differences, but I think that Jesus calls us to do so. We are tasked with ministering to and interacting with all people, sharing the love of God through our words and our actions. We are called to embrace the diversity around us. In the words of a great poet:

"We need more fruitcakes in this world and less bakers
 We need people that care...
 There's a little bit of fruitcake left in every one of us."

—"Fruitcakes," Songwriters: Jimmy Buffett, Amy Lee Schwartzberg

Though sometimes difficult, we are also called to celebrate our own individual quirks and differences. We can acknowledge that sometimes we are a mainstream gingerbread and sometimes our actions put us in the center of the fruitcake category. We need to relish our "fruitcakeness."

The angel that appeared to the shepherds on the night of Jesus' birth brought a message of Good News. A Savior had been born, a Savior that was sent not just to one group of people, but one who came to all people. Starting with His birth, Jesus interacted with people who were out of the mainstream (maybe some New Testament fruitcakes): shepherds, foreign kings, fishermen, tax collectors, women, sinners, etc. During His ministry, it seemed natural for Him to reach out to diverse groups, sharing the Good News, offering salvation to those who believed. He ministered to the mainstream (the gingerbreads) and to those who were not mainstream (the fruitcakes). He delivered a message of salvation for all. During the Christmas season we celebrate that our Savior has come for all people, including us when we are at our most "fruitcake-y."

Dear God: We thank you for the diversity around us. Help us to appreciate our individual differences and quirks. Thank you for the birth of Jesus our Savior who brought salvation to all people. Amen

Susan Lambert

Advent Candle Lightings For Home

Joy: Week of December 10

The third week of Advent we remember the gift of Joy we have in Jesus. We remember the joy that Mary felt when the angel Gabriel told her that a special child would be born to her - a child who would save and deliver all people. Joy is the gift we all receive from the unconditional love Christ has for us. To the shepherds, the angel announced the good news of great joy – that a Savior had been born. God wants us all to know joy.

As we light this candle, we remember that Christ came to bring true and everlasting joy to all people.

Light two purple candles and one pink candle.

Reflect: How have you experienced joy this week?

Blessed Redeemer, we thank you for the gift of Joy you bring us. This week in our Advent journey, open our eyes to the joy that surrounds us. And help us live as people of joy, who share your light and love with all the world. We ask this in the name of the one born in Bethlehem, who is God with us, Emmanuel. Amen.



The scriptures I have referred to have made me aware of the peace I can have with God through my faith and my trust in Him, and the ultimate sacrifice of His son, Jesus. Surprisingly this magnificent peace offered through the grace of God can be hard to accept and maintain. It is not easy to let go and place everything in God's hands.

I often ask the question, "Why is something that seems so easy and wonderful be so difficult?" Don't I have enough faith and trust in God to let go of my own needs to control things in my life? I have both the desire to be able to fix things in my life and the knowledge to know I cannot. My choice is to trust God's promises and let peace rule in my heart, or to rely on myself and reject the peace He has to offer. I choose the former. As Advent approaches, we celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace. Because I have faith and trust in Him, I freely and joyfully accept His gift of peace.

Father, I humbly accept the peace you offer me. Wars and conflicts in our world will not cease until Jesus comes to establish a lasting peace. Once your peace rules our hearts and behaviors, we can share that peace with others. In this beautiful season of the birth of Jesus keep me focused on you and the deep and abiding peace you offer me. Amen

Bobbi Marino

Advent Candle Lightings For Home

Peace: Week of December 17

This week we remember the gift of Peace we have in Christ. Through John the Baptist and the prophets, God asks us to prepare the way of the Lord, whom the prophet Isaiah calls "the Prince of Peace."

As we light this candle today may we slow down and seek out the peace that only God can provide. We are called to work for that peace of Christ to come and take root in us.

Light three purple candles and one pink candle.

Reflect: How have you experienced peace this week?

Peaceful Presence, we thank you for the gift of peace you give us through Jesus. We seek your peace in our lives, our homes, our families, our church, and the whole world. As we journey to Bethlehem and beyond, let us diligently follow in the footsteps of the greatest peacemaker the world has ever known, Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. Amen.

Did Joseph put his ear to Mary's belly each night before bed and call, "Hello, Baby! I am your daddy and I love you!" to our Savior?

As Joseph watched Mary's belly grow taut, could he fathom the life that would be lived by the Christ child within?

Maybe he did some of those things, or maybe none of them; after all, more than two-thousand years of history, technology and science separate the two of us.

But I do know one deep connection that Joseph and I shared that Advent season: Our hearts sang out with joyful anticipation as we awaited Love into our homes.

Open my heart as I await the arrival of the Christ Child with joyful anticipation. Help me await in wonder and anticipate new beginnings. May I be prepared to welcome Love to my heart and home this Christmas. Amen.

Ben Hartman

Sunday, December 17, 2023

Prince of Peace

For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. —Isaiah 9:6

So many beautiful names for Jesus exist that individuals often make a choice of their favorite, depending on the image that means the most in their own lives. On my own spiritual journey that name has changed many times. I usually come back to Father which is so simple yet profound. Lamb of God and Bread of Life are two other personal favorites. However, for this writing I chose Prince of Peace which warranted Bible research for me. Why would Jesus be called the Prince of Peace when so much fighting and hatred exists in our world? Why doesn't He just put an end to it?

It made me ask myself, "What was the kind of peace to which Jesus was referring?" In John 14:27 Jesus says, "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give you. I give to you not as the world gives." So, Jesus' peace was not promising us personal safety, the elimination of wars, or ending the present acrimony between factions within our country.

What then is He offering us? In Romans 5:1 are the words, "Therefore since we have been made righteous through His faithfulness, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Peace is a deeper and lasting peace between our hearts and God, one that cannot be taken away. Because of Christ's sacrifice I can have a relationship with the Holy Spirit that will have me live in ways I cannot possibly live by myself. This peace, joy and love will show in us, and it will spill over into our own personal relationships with others.

Monday, December 11, 2023

A Star Shone Over Bethlehem - A Star of Joy

In the crumbling towers of Babylon
 An ancient study continued on.
 Nightly observers scanned the skies
 Watching the heavenly bodies rise
 And recording their data on tablets of clay
 Just as they did on the long ago day
 Before the kings of Persia held sway
 Over all the Mesopotamian land.
 Now Persian scholars lent a hand
 Bringing new thoughts and a new kind of lore.
 Sharp-witted, sharp-eyed Melchior
 Was one of their number. With him he brought
 Scrolls of the secrets the Magi had taught.
 Daily he sought the knowledge they hold,
 Nightly he pondered what stars foretold.
 With two friends at school he had shared
 Thoughts and ideas. The three compared
 Their hopes and dreams and came to agree
 The state of the world was about to be
 Changed forever and gloriously.
 But when it would happen they could not agree.

Now school days end as do all days.
 The three good friends had parted ways:
 Casper became an imperial clerk;
 Balthazar went to Egypt to work;
 To Babylon came Melchior.
 There he studied and dreamed as before.

One day in a market his notice fell
 On a scroll of a prophet of Israel.
 His interest aroused, he brought it away
 And read it amazed the rest of the day.
 He learned from the prophet that someday a king
 Would come with an army of angels and bring
 Justice and mercy to all and peace
 And the reign of this king would never cease.

Saturday, December 16, 2023

Melchior from that time on
 Carefully kept his attention on
 The sector of sky which the ancients tell
 Predicts the future of Israel.
 For Melchior thought that before the king's birth
 A sign from the sky would tell the earth.
 But many months passed without a hint.
 Melchior's hopes were almost spent.
 Then one dull night when he'd let his eyes close,
 He was suddenly jolted awake from his doze.
 There in the sky where he thought it would be
 Was the wondrous sign he had hoped to see:
 A golden star whose steady light
 Brightened the corners of the night.

"Messiah has come!" he cried, "I must go
 To welcome him into his world below
 The heaven which surely is his domain.
 I must write my friends and clearly explain
 All that I've learned and ask them to meet
 And go with me to humbly greet
 And lay at his feet all the gifts that we bring.
 And welcome here the great young king."

Melchior rose feeling lighter than air.
 He ran to his rooms and began to prepare
 The things he would need for the journey ahead:
 Gifts and guides and camels instead
 Of horses. Desert travel is steady and slow
 And west to Jerusalem they must go.
 It seemed like a year before they could start,
 But at last the three friends were prepared to depart
 To follow the star that led to the boy.
 Melchior called it the "star of great joy."

Guy Johnson

Awaiting. Wondering. Naming?

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a child, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. —Luke 1:30-33

This year, I await the Christ child. In Advent of 2012, I was also awaiting the Lane-&-Ben child.

As a first-time, soon-to-be dad, I was all too busy preparing for this child to come into our home. I read all the latest labor and delivery literature, met regularly with the midwives, and attended weekly childbirth classes. Every moment of my 'free' time was devoted to preparing the nursery: furniture assembly and closet clearing to make room for all the gear that comes with the baby. (Who knew such a small person needed so much stuff!?) While I exhausted myself with all the preparations, it was my excited anticipation that drove me to complete the to-do list. I was excited ... really excited.

On our kitchen counter sat a notepad where, each evening over dinner, we added or marked off potential names for our coming child. We thumbed through the baby-name books borrowed from the public library. More adding. More scratching out. What name shall be given this child?

Our final decision was one that spoke to our hearts and remained on the list through many conversations. After all, bestowing a name upon someone is not to be taken lightly.

Every day, as I watched my wife's belly grow taut, my imagination whirled with the possibilities of life held within; what life shall be lived by the child within?

Each night before bed, I placed my ear to Lane's belly and in my silly, sing-songy voice called, "Hello, Baby! I am your daddy and I love you!" Then, I listened. I wondered.

One night, when I took this moment to slow down from the busyness of preparing and anticipating, I paused and wondered....

How did Joseph prepare for his new child? What did he read? Did Joseph keep a copy of the latest childrearing book by the first-century's Dr. Benjamin Spock on his bedside table? Of course, he had no need for baby-name books from the library; the angels took care of that task for the couple.

Did Joseph paint the nursery according to Mary's chosen color scheme? Even as a carpenter, did he actually read the directions as he constructed nursery furniture?

Friday, December 15, 2023

Tuesday, December 12, 2023

The Early Names of Jesus - Self-fulfilling Prophecy

Yesterday I started by talking about all that was said about Jesus either prior to, or right after his birth. As a reminder, Gabriel told Mary, "He will be great, and will be called the son of the Highest" and "that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God." (Luke 1:32 and 35) Joseph was told, "he will save his people from their sins." (Matthew 1:21) Elizabeth said that he was blessed and called Mary "the mother of my Lord." (Luke 1:43)

Within hours of his birth the shepherds are told, "For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." (Luke 2:10)

As a former teacher, I can't help but think about the concepts of self-fulfilling prophecy and the Pygmalion Effect when I read these quotes.

The APA Dictionary of Psychology defines self-fulfilling prophecy as "a belief or expectation that helps to bring about its own fulfillment, as, for example, when a teacher's preconceptions about a student's ability influence the child's achievement for better or worse," and Pygmalion Effect as "a consequence or reaction in which the expectations of a leader or superior engender behavior from followers or subordinates that is consistent with these expectations: a form of self-fulfilling prophecy. For example, raising manager expectations of the performance of subordinate employees has been found to enhance the performance of those employees."

Now, I'm not saying Jesus became who he was because he was told these things. Honestly, it's more evidence of the divine that he turned out the way he did after hearing these things. I'm pretty sure the average child would become insufferable if praised and worshiped the way Jesus undoubtedly was. But I do think it is worth contemplating the impact these early commendations may have had on him. I am sure growing up knowing you are the Son of God and that a whole people are relying on you impacts the way you carry yourself.

I invite you to use this as a jumping off point to think about self-fulfilling prophecies. What names or attributes have others given you in the past? How did they impact your development, both positively and negatively? What prophecies have you spoken on others? It is important to recognize the impact words and names can have, even the many names given to Jesus.

Dear Lord, thank you for sending your son. We thank you for the man that grew to fully embody those words spoken over him when he was so small. Help us to live up to the name you have given us, as your people who love our neighbors. And let those names we give others only serve to build them up. Amen.

Molly Means

Joy

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds. —James 1:2

Joy is more than happiness. It is a perpetual gladness in your heart that comes from experiencing, knowing, and trusting Jesus. Joy is knowing that God is always present and that He keeps his promises. Joy is your soul acknowledging that Jesus is real and lives within you.

We all go through trials and tribulations. Some of our trials seem to be so enormous that we will never be able to overcome the obstacles. How can we pay the bills when we have no job? How can God have made my child have diabetes? How can this young woman with no job skills take care of her veteran and find money to pay the bills when his injuries are so severe? The storm just came through, and I lost all of the food for the next two months when the power went out. Woe is me.

When you have no job, suddenly you get paid some money from a source you never thought would come through. God did not give your child diabetes, but it happened. God did give you doctors and scientists who developed diets and medications to help your child live a full life. This young woman meets an angel who gives her lists of resources like the Elizabeth Dole Foundation, the Bob and Deloris Hope Fund, and Give an Hour. The church food pantry got an extra supply of food and you were given emergency rations. As Psalm 30:5 says, "his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning."

God is always here for us. We can rejoice knowing that he will never leave or forsake us even when we are weeping the loudest. Let us always remember to think of God's JOY when our soul is not listening because it only hears our weeping. The sun will come out tomorrow and we will find that our soul is refreshed knowing God's JOY.

God, our JOY and pleasure, please help us to change our stories so that our soul always hears your promises even when we are weeping. Yes, things can look horrid, but you are always with us and the sun will shine tomorrow. Amen

Daphne G. Grady

Wednesday, December 13, 2023

Thursday, December 14, 2023

Emmanuel, God with us, The Incarnate

Therefore, the Lord will give you a sign. The young woman is pregnant and is about to give birth to a son, and she will name him Immanuel. —Isaiah 7:14

Have you ever had days when it was hard to be joyful? I must admit I've had many. In 2019 I turned 50; at first I was excited. I had been looking forward to speaking my mind and not worrying about what anyone else thought. At the very least they'd just think that I was old.

By the time summer arrived, joy was nowhere in sight. I just couldn't pull myself out of it. I prayed and sang songs. My sons and I went on a fun vacation to Universal Studios, yet joy was eluding me. August arrived and I was diagnosed with breast cancer again. Joy simply refused to emerge.

The year 2020 brought with it a multitude of emotions and fears. It's hard to believe, but in the midst of all that I knew that God was with me. Joy started bubbling up in me. I must say I was a little confused by this. I should not be feeling joy when the world is falling apart. I just knew something was wrong with me, so I prayed,

"Why do I feel such joy when I should be down and depressed?"

I heard God say, "I never wanted you to feel depressed nor do I want you to worry about things beyond your control. You are experiencing my joy because you have begun to remember that I am with you." Now when I feel my joy trying to slip away, I remind myself that God is with me.

"Joy, joy, God's great joy! Joy, joy down in my soul, sweet beautiful soul-saving joy! Oh joy, joy in my soul." (Georgia Mass Choir)

Dear God, Thank you for your joy and for reminding us that you are always with us. Thank you for Jesus Christ the Incarnate. In his name, amen.

L. Darlene Dickson

The Early Names of Jesus - A Mother's Thoughts

Before Jesus was even born, many people already believed certain things about him. Gabriel told Mary, "He will be great, and will be called the son of the Highest" and "that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God." (Luke 1:32 and 35) Joseph was told, "he will save his people from their sins." (Matthew 1:21) His relative Elizabeth said that he was blessed and called Mary "the mother of my Lord." (Luke 1:43) Even little fetus John the Baptist was somersaulting in Elizabeth's stomach for joy of meeting his cousin.

Within hours of his birth the shepherds are told, "For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10), after which they went to visit and "made widely known the sayings that were told them concerning this child." (Luke 2:17)

Oof. That is quite the heavy mantle for a tiny baby to be born under. No wonder Mary "kept all these things and pondered them in her heart." (Luke 2:19) As a mother, it has to have been such a mix of emotions. She was given the highest honor of all time, but I can't imagine she took all these prophecies and accolades lightly. This was her little human, who had just hours ago been one with her, and now people are already putting all their hopes and dreams on his fragile shoulders. And, let's be honest, at this point our smooshy little King of Kings couldn't even hold his own head up, so who was really shouldering the burden of these expectations during those first tender years? I think any mother could tell you who.

Today, let's hold some space for Mary and all the other mothers (and fathers) who carry the mental load of parenthood – those who do the thinking, planning, management and emotional work that underpins all aspects of family life. If this is you, pause a second. Take a deep breath, untense your shoulders, and know that you are loved and appreciated, and the world couldn't turn without all that you do. If you are not currently in this stage of life, take a minute to think of those close to you who are. Let them know you see them, as I hope others did for Mary so long ago.

Dear Lord, thank you for Mary who shepherded our shepherd. Thank you for all those who are currently shepherding their own flock. Please lay your hand upon them and give them peace in this busy season. Amen.

Molly Means