

2017
Daily Readings for Advent



Park Lake Presbyterian Church
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Sunday, December 3, First Sunday of Advent

Communion, 2 Cents a meal collection

- 9:00 am Sunday School - Education Building
- 10:00 am Fellowship - Struble Hall
- 10:30 am Worship -Sanctuary
- 11:45 am Gingerbread house fundraiser - Struble Hall
- Lunch served - Chili, fruit
- All are Welcome! All ages!

Wednesday, December 6, P.L.O.W. Park Lake on Wednesdays

- 6:00 pm Potluck dinner - entrée provided - Struble Hall
- please bring dessert to share

Holy Tollers Bell Ringers & Reader's Theatre Performance

Sunday, December 10, Second Sunday of Advent

- 9:00 am Sunday School - Education Building
- 10:00 am Fellowship - Struble Hall
- 10:30 am Worship - Sanctuary
- 5:30 pm Advent Vesper service - Sanctuary

Saturday, December 16

- 9:30 am Children's Nativity Pageant rehearsal , Sanctuary

Sunday, December 17, Third Sunday of Advent

Poinsettia Sunday, Canned food collection

- 9:00 am Sunday School - Education Building
- 10:00 am Fellowship - Struble Hall
- 10:30 am Worship / Children's Nativity Pageant /Special Music - Sanctuary
- 5:30 pm Advent Vesper service - Sanctuary

Friday, December 22

- 5:30 pm Pizza and Christmas Caroling - dinner in Struble Hall

Sunday, December 24, Christmas Eve Services, Fourth Sunday of Advent

- 9:00 am Sunday School - Education Building
- 10:00 am Fellowship - Struble Hall
- 10:30 am Worship - Sanctuary
- 5:30 pm Carols and Candles - Sanctuary
- 11:00 pm Communion, Carols and Candles - Sanctuary

Monday, December 25 MERRY CHRISTMAS!!!

Singing Our Way to Christmas 2017 Advent Devotion

The season of Christmas has its own peculiar sights and sounds. Music is part of that. I get annoyed when stores start playing Christmas tunes before Thanksgiving. I even sometimes get annoyed at radio stations that are committed to playing Christmas songs from Christmas until the end of the year. There are only so many Christmas songs and one gets tired of hearing about the sappy Christmas sweater or that Grandma got run over by a reindeer.

But Christmas songs are story-telling for the church. They are faith proclaiming and affirming. We sing about the promise of Jesus's coming, the incarnation of God among us, the unexpected way of His birth, and the responses of the whole creation to this small child.

So this year, we'll sing our way to Christmas by considering our songs of faith in this special season. For the most part, our devotion writers chose their own carols to write about. They range from Advent, to Christmas, to secular songs, familiar and unfamiliar.

You might even find a 'new favorite'! We will also be sending out electronic versions of the devotions, so if you would like to have these emailed to you daily, please email Carol Bookhardt at carolparklake@gmail.com. The e-versions will include links to the music being sung by a variety of artists... sing along!

Don't hesitate to let a devotion writer know if their words were meaningful to you, or to pass it along to someone else for their Advent walk and Christmas reflections.

So over the river and through the palms, here we go, welcoming the presence of God's Christ to guide our way!

I want to add a special thanks to Carol Bookhardt for putting together this year's Advent Devotion and to Anne Vercheski for her help in editing.

Helen DeBevoise

December 1
Scripture Reading for today:

Lorraine Schneider
Isaiah 2:1-4

I'll Be Home For Christmas

Christmas 1943 and 1944, my parents did all they could to give me a happy Christmas: the beautiful tree, mom's spritz cookies, more gifts than I could hope for.

My brother, Art, was in the Army, fighting in Europe. He was one of the brave young men who would storm the beach at Normandy on D-Day. My brother, Bud, was in the Army fighting in the Pacific, going from island to island. He was part of a small squad that went on shore in darkness the night before the invasions. They set up communications with the ships and then directed their gunfire when the fighting began.

I don't know how my parents, so worried for their sons, could give me as normal a childhood as was possible during the 2nd World War. I can't imagine what my mom's prayers for her boys were like as she sat up in bed reading her Bible every night.

We were one of the blessed families. Both brothers came home to us when the war was over.

Christmas, 1955, we gathered at the family home; my parents, Uncle Charlie, my brothers and their families again trying to give the baby sister, now a young married woman, a happy Christmas. My husband, Norman, was in the Army in Korea.

War to me is a personal thing. As nations confront each other, a mother, father, sister and wife, pray in fear. And the men they love engage in life threatening battle while they dream of being home Christmas Eve at the house in Irvington, New Jersey.

Prayer: God, help us to finally attain peace. Help us to create a world where dreams are realities, where love conquers hate, where all families can come together on Christmas to celebrate the birth of your Son. Amen.

December 2
Scripture Reading for today:

Kurt Michael Hanus
Isaiah 6:1-3

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence

*Let all mortal flesh keep silence
and with fear and trembling stand*

It is quite a tall order to keep silence, to stand still and endure one's fear and trembling. To not speak, not move, not 'do' anything, but rather just silently wait it out for God knows what. And God does know what, but we don't.

And so, we wait. We wait in trembling fear of the unknown.

Now, it would be tempting to scroll for answers through our book of faces, or consult that great oracle Siri. Maybe she knows what's coming and can lure us away to someplace else - anywhere else - from this waiting and trembling, this impossible silence.

Perhaps this pregnant silence will give birth to some powerful, winning force that conquers and prevails! A supernova storm that defeats our enemies! A towering ruler to rule out the rule breakers! What a status update!

But still...

I see my mental maneuvers avert me from this impossible silence and trembling. As my mental noise recedes, I become illuminated by a bright northern star: the universe birthing from afar. "Oh my, it's true! A horizon event!" One so huge the world cannot contain it, so brilliant, one cannot look directly at it. An eclipse so powerful and majestic it can only be viewed through the prism of a baby.

This is not what I expected, this peasant born power! This power of all through the portal of small. The ground of being that encompasses us, comes to us.

No ruling overlord but a Lord over rules, where first are last and least are most. Small, vulnerable, flowing, giving. It lets us go but never lets go. It is LOVE! It began as LOVE! It ends in LOVE! S/he is LOVE! We are LOVE! Good news! Good news! Good news!

Prayer: *God, we silently wait, anticipate, and participate your birthing inside us and among us. Amen.*

HOPE

1st Sunday of Advent

December 3

Scripture Reading for today:

Paige McRight

Isaiah 7:10-17

Oh Come, Oh Come, Emmanuel

I can't remember when I first sang this Advent hymn. I expect I was a teen growing up in the church my father was called to organize in North Alabama. I studied piano and flute in those years and the minor key of the tune reinforced the words of mourning and longing in my young mind so that it immediately became a favorite. Those were days when I lived into hope of a better future. My mother had died of complications from a suicide attempt when I was thirteen, and my father and I lived among her family but were alienated from them by her death. This hymn spoke to me then of the hope Christ brings in powerful ways.

It is one of those 'old hymns', a really old one. Our hymnal tells us that it dates from the 12th century. I like it that this hymn has spoken to God's people for generations, Roman Catholic and Protestant, as soon as there were Protestants, in Germany and Italy, in England and across the seas in this country. It binds us in prayer to those ancient Hebrew people who prayed for the Messiah to come with eager longing. It speaks of promise that the current difficulties, exile, suffering, death, dark night of the soul, whatever our greatest struggles will be overcome in Him who is to come. Each verse ends calling us to rejoice in the promise that Emmanuel is coming. Even in the midst of current suffering, we are called to hope and live into God's promised future in the One who comes. We can dare to hope and to live into that future as our Hebrew ancestors reminded us, because God is faithful and God's love is steadfast.

This year I have had several conversations with my sons about what it means to be a person of faith in these days. The divisions in the world are clear and profound. People choose up sides and shun those who are different from themselves in many ways. We have been at war in the Arab world for a long time and tensions within other nations seem to threaten our security. I have been reminded of the Civil Rights struggles and the Vietnam war protests that were the background into which I first sang this hymn. We have come a ways since those days when soldiers were not welcomed home by many and Black people could not even eat in public restaurants, though we still have a mighty long ways to go. The prayer of this hymn speaks to my heart this Advent just as it first did more than fifty years ago:

Prayer: *O come, Desire of nations bind all peoples in one heart and mind.
Bid envy, strife and discord cease. Fill the whole world with heaven's peace. Rejoice!
Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, oh Israel! Amen*

December 4
Scripture Reading for today:

Helen DeBevoise
Isaiah 9:2

Some Children See Him

I only learned about this Christmas song in recent years, though it is older than I am. It was written in 1951 by American jazz musician Alfred Shaddick Burt along with family friend Wihla Hutson. It was a Burt family tradition to design an annual Christmas card. Burt's father, an Episcopal priest, would include original carols in each card with both words and music, to send out to family and friends. In 1942, after Alfred graduated college, his father asked him to take over creating the family card and "*Christmas Cometh Caroling*," was born. From then on, Alfred would write the family carols, continuing until 1954. He wrote 15 carols in all, most of which were only performed for immediate family.

"*Some Children See Him*," was one of those Burt carols which was more widely circulated. The text sings of all races of children seeing Jesus in their own context, in their own skin.

The perspective of children has provided some of the most moving memories of Christmas for me. I love it when children are caught up in the wonder of the infant Jesus. I've seen it in little ones dressed as sheep peering into the wooden crèche. The earnest faces of young teens that have memorized precious Christmas texts and stand before the congregation reciting it. And when Christmas candle lights dance off the face of a child singing the final *Silent night* at the evening service, I'm captivated. The freshness of a child's perspective is a gift and reminder to us all.

What touches me most about the incarnation of God's Christ is that God became one of us. It's captured in this song: God sees us. Understands us. Wants to be with us. This is what Love looks like!

*The children in each different place
will see the baby Jesus' face
like theirs, but bright with heavenly grace,
and filled with holy light.*

*O lay aside each earthly thing
and with thy heart as offering,
come worship now the infant King.
'Tis love that's born tonight!*

Prayer: *O Lord, we welcome you into our lives this Christmas. We pray that you make your bed here – in our relationships, in our places of worship, in our home, in our hearts. And never leave. Amen.*

December 5
Scripture Reading for today:

Walk Jones
Isaiah 11:1-9

People Look East

People Look East was written in the 20th Century by the English poet Eleanor Farjeon and set to an ancient French tune. Grab the hymn book and read the words, or do an internet search.

The title line of the poem/hymn is repeated $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way through each verse, "People look east and sing today." Why look at one compass point? Sunrise! During the long English winter, or anywhere in the top 1/3 of the globe, the nights are long and it is easy to be depressed, even hopeless. But starting on December 21st the eastern sky starts lightening earlier each day. A long, cold winter is ahead, but the night's are getting shorter! Look east, there's hope!

God gave the church Advent and Christmas in the bleak midwinter to boost our souls and remind us we serve Emmanuel, God with us.

In Florida trees are green all year, yet we still trim our homes and hearths with greenery to bring nature's beauty inside. Our Christmas trees may be plastic, but they remind us of God's everlasting love. The hymn refers to birds guarding empty nests even as fledgling time was chosen by God. Another verse looks out on a clear, cold, country winter night when the stars fill the sky like a bowl of lights.

This is a great hymn/poem, with theology we need to hear. When the days seem darkest there is hope and good news. Jesus was born in Bethlehem. He taught, preached, blessed, died and rose. This is a message for all Christians, no matter our latitude on the globe. Look with hope at the words you found.

Prayer: Thank you Lord for a time to prepare for your coming, an Advent of hope. May we prepare our homes and nests for Christmas Day and for Christ's final return with song and trumpet. Amen.

December 6
Scripture Reading for today:

Erin Cook
Isaiah 40:9

Go Tell It On the Mountain

Sinners Reconcile
Alpha
Let Your
Voices Ring
A Happy Band
Tell; Proclaim; Live
It
Our Father
Nations Sing

*God Sent Us Salvation, That Blessed Christmas Morn.
What is this Salvation God Sent us?*

I can not get enough of *Go Tell It On the Mountain*! The version by Anne Murray has been a long time favorite. Her version gives you the opportunity to use your full voice and lift those hands and sing! It's filled with beautiful chords, fine back-up singers and a crescendo that I love to belt out. And yes, I sound good and I feel good! Isn't that the point, to feel good and be loud and smiling, when you're telling the whole world that God sent us this precious gift, that he wants us with Him, that He loves us so very much. That our sins are wiped away if we just believe. And believe, and believe!

In the last few years I stumbled upon the Jim Nabors version (yes, Gomer Pyle!). Mr. Nabors' version is more like the happy band he wants you to join, conductor in feathered hat! His lyrics are less traditional, creating more of a story of cold and no room at the inn but wait a star is shining bright and there's a baby and the wise men will be along soon and we have a King! So "come along and join our happy band!"

Salvation? It's this happy, soul enlightening, shout it out chorus of God's Love for All of Us!

And if you can find a mountain or perhaps a small hill,
don't be afraid to share it with all of this world!

Prayer: *Father, Glorious King, Born This Christmas Morn: Thank you for freeing us, giving us spirit, humbling us, giving us soul, giving us a voice! Alleluia! Amen!*

December 7
Scripture Reading for today:

Robert Larr
Isaiah 40:31

O Holy Night

O Holy Night has been one of my favorite songs to hear at Christmastime since I was a small child. The song sonically is so majestic that many artists are able to send a chill down my spine because of how beautiful they make it sound. Many artists have covered the song, ranging from Bing Crosby, Perry Como, Nat King Cole, to Celine Dion, Whitney Houston, Josh Groban and Park Lake's own Elizabeth Ingram.

The song came about because a parish priest in 1847 asked a local wine seller, Placide Cappeau de Roquemaure to write a poem for Christmas. After Placide wrote the poem, titled "Minuit, chrétiens", he realized that the poem was so beautiful that he should have music accompany the words. He approached a friend, Adolphe Charles Adams, a composer of the time, to compose the music.

John Sullivan Dwight's English translation of the original version is the one most are familiar with. The third verse of his translation is the best part of the carol for me.

*Truly He taught us to love one another,
His law is love and His gospel is peace.
Chains he shall break, for the slave is our brother.
And in his name all oppression shall cease.
Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we,
With all our hearts we praise His holy name.
Christ is the Lord! Then ever, ever praise we,
His power and glory evermore proclaim!
His power and glory evermore proclaim!*

Love one another. That at the end of the day was the message Jesus brought to this world. It is also a message that is truly needed.

Prayer: *O heavenly father, thank you sending your son with the message of love to us.
Please help us share this message for those who are in need as much as to those we know.
By doing so we truly spreading your word and your love. Amen.*

December 8
Scripture Reading for today:

Alice Schmidt
Isaiah 60:2-3

Veiled in Darkness, Judah Lay

*Veiled in darkness Judah lay, waiting for the promised day,
while across the shadowy night streamed a flood of glorious light,
heavenly voices chanting then, "Peace on earth, good will to men."
Still the earth in darkness lies. Up from death's dark vale arise
voices of a world in grief, prayers of men who seek relief:
now our darkness pierce again, "Peace on earth, good will to men."
Light of light, we humbly pray, shine upon thy world today;
Break the gloom of our dark night, fill our souls with love and light,
Send thy blessed word again, "Peace on earth, good will to men."*

There are many times that, if we look for the light of God, we can find it. I hadn't seen my refugee families for several weeks, what with the hurricane etc. I worried about them but when I approached her door, Asmaa looked out with a huge smile and a cry of welcome, and peace and joy filled me.

When I visited Gloria in her last weeks and saw the tender care during this hard time by her son and caregiver, there was light and peace, especially knowing Gloria's faith in Jesus' promises.

We had a large water oak cut down, having landed perfectly between, not on, our neighbor's tree and our hedge. We congratulated the tree company boss and he said, "God put it down there perfectly. Amazing!" Amazing to me was hearing this testimony from an old man. I need his model of joy in God's work and joy in praising God because I am too shy.

Maybe this meditation is not enough about darkness. Forgive me, there is just so much light with Jesus in my life.

Prayer: Thank you, Jesus, for turning us from darkness to light, from sin to forgiveness, from worry to joy. Amen.

December 9
Scripture Reading for today:

Gayle Schmidt
Psalm 24:7-10

O Lord, How Shall I Meet You?

When given a list of songs for my devotion this year I was not familiar with any of them. I chose this one thinking it might be new. Imagine my surprise when I found that the words were written by Paul Gerhart in 1607! In 1653 John Cruger published the music for this 10 verse hymn although most hymnals use only three verses. The Presbyterian Hymnal contains 61 songs designated for Advent and Christmas and this is the only one to ask a question. As I kept coming back to this hymn seeking its relationship to these very holy days I struggled. What was this man from four centuries ago thinking? Was he struggling as well? I can only assume he was.

So, for a few moments, let's each ask that same question – O Lord, How Shall I Meet You? Considering the Lord's answer may be uncomfortable. What about the decisions I made as a teenager, wife, mother, professor? Am I living the life He expected? As a Christian, am I seeking to live as God told Micah, *"What does the Lord require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."* Maybe this is the answer to the question Paul Gerhart asked so long ago. It is certainly appropriate for us today. Simply act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God, but it isn't simple. We are challenged every day.

As we enter the Advent season there are many questions for each of us. As we light the candles of Peace, Joy, Love and Hope let's consider how we contribute to each in our families, church, community and world. It is too easy to become caught up in the hustle and bustle of Christmas. Let's stop and remember at this time we are meeting the Lord. How shall we greet him?

Prayer: *Lord, give us the courage to ask how we should meet you. Remind us of your love and grace as we focus on your birth this season. The life you led is the way for us. Amen.*

PEACE

2nd Sunday of Advent

December 10

Linda Wright Simmons

Scripture Reading for today:

Revelation 22:12-13

Of the Father's Love Begotten

I didn't grow up loving church music. Well, I liked Bible School songs, and Youth Sunday when we tried to sneak in some John Denver. My home church, chartered in 1962, sang more Avery & Marsh songs than sacred classics.

I came to love church music in seminary. High in the hills of Marin County, California, perched a soaring white building, Stewart Chapel at San Francisco Theological Seminary, and in it, a real-life pipe organ, and a passionate worship and music professor Wil Russell.

There, I learned the hymnal, that tunes have names and meters, and texts have memories. Professor Russell would pull a hymn tune from the hymnal and throw in some bagpipe; the hymns came alive.

The hymn we now sing in Advent and Christmastime was new to me. Our professor played the simple tune DIVINUM MYSTERIUM, and we imagined 5th century Marcus Aurelius Clemens Prudentius leading a dimly lit procession of monks, singing by candlelight one dark December night.

*Of the Father's love begotten ere the worlds began to be,
He is Alpha and Omega; he the source, the ending he.*

Mysterious, poetic. Maybe this is a hymn for the wee hours of Christmas morning, the first song of Christmas day!

This hymn proclaims the Big Picture, Jesus' birth on a macro scale. Other carols and hymns may be satisfied with a micro view of the infant Jesus – manger, mother – but not this one. Only the growing, building, rising, soaring song of the Word will do! Begotten not made. Present from beginning to end, promised by prophets, praised by powers, dominions.

*Christ, to Thee with God the Father and O Holy Ghost, to Thee,
Hymn and chant and high thanksgiving and unwearied praises be!*

Now *that's* the way to welcome the Babe, our Redeemer.

December 11
Scripture Reading for today:

Nancy Jones
Jeremiah 24:27

In the Bleak Midwinter

Ahhhh, finally time for Christmas music! I love this time of year and I admit that I may listen to a Christmas CD say in May, July or October. Years ago, I would limit myself to purchasing one cassette tape, then CD, to one a year. I often purchased the one offered by Hallmark since it was a great value. In 2006, the artist was James Taylor, (big swoon). I immediately unwrapped the cellophane and played it on the way home. The third track was a slow song that sounds like a lullaby. It certainly grabbed my attention. Taylor's mellow voice brought me to tears as I wondered what was this song?

Since it was Advent sliding into Christmas, in Sunday worship we were singing Advent and Christmas hymns. As I was flipping through The Presbyterian Hymnal, I saw it: that's the song that James Taylor sang! It is a hymn! I was elated. I begged the pastor to put it in a worship service. He claimed, the congregation doesn't know it.

It was then the Sunday after Christmas and that church's tradition was to have a hymn fest of sorts. The congregation could raise their hands to request a favorite hymn. I eagerly raised my hand over and over again. Disappointed each time I wasn't selected. We needed to sing this hymn. Time was running out and we were singing just the first verse. I then was asked what I wanted to sing! "Number 36, *In the Bleak Midwinter*, but the last verse." I was so pleased that I could share this beautiful hymn with my church family.

This hymn is a poem by Christina Rossetti set to music by Gustav Holst. There are many verses in the poem and there are many different combinations of the verses. I have lived my life in various parts of the southeast US, and often it has been warmer than cooler so I don't associate snow with Christmas or it being bleak. Words that touch me are in one verse: "*But His mother only In her maiden bliss, Worshipped the beloved With a kiss.*" *A new mother was able to worship her child, Son of God, with deep love of a tender kiss. How special is that to be able to kiss Jesus?*

The last verse becomes a prayer for me every time I hear this song.

*"What can I give Him, Poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a wise man, I would do my part:
Yet what I can I give Him: Give my heart."*

December 12
Scripture Reading for today:

Cliff McKay
Micah 5:2-5a

O Little Town of Bethlehem

Picture a small Middle-Eastern town in the 1st Century . . . buildings close together . . narrow dirt streets . . . no lights . . . the smell of animals. It is dark, a profound darkness without a single candle burning in the middle of the night . . . really dark, a darkness wrapped in a "dreamless sleep."

In this insignificant, little town, in a long ago, faraway place, "*the hopes and fears of all the years are met.*"

In Bethlehem the fears of 21st Century America are focused, . . . the threat of an egotistical dictator in Korea . . . the challenges of a planet warming, threatening to submerge large cities around the world . . . terrorists who want to kill and maim . . . polarized and immobilized legislators . . . a populace lacking focus and direction. But focused also are 21st Century America's hopes . . . the hope for ordered life . . . security with friends and neighbors . . . freedom from disease . . . a stable economy . . . nations of the world working together . . . a peaceful world for their children.

How can the concerns of our times meet on that dark street in that far away, long ago place? Because in "*the dark streets shineth the everlasting light,*" an infant born in a manger, Jesus, the Christ, the Light of the World.

Sit quietly. Turn off the world. Light a candle. Sing quietly the words of the carol. Sit quietly amidst the decorations, the tree, the presents, the familiar aromas in the air, and trust to God your hopes and your fears, God's great gift of Christmas.

December 13
Scripture Reading for today:

Anne Vercheski
John 1:1-5

In The First Light

One of my favorite parts of Advent is Lessons and Carols at The Geneva School, where Rebecca goes to school and from where Catherine graduated last year. Familiar songs and new ones are sung. Familiar Scripture is read starting in Genesis, progressing to the promise of the Messiah in Isaiah, to the birth of Jesus told in Luke, and ending with John 1, “the Word became flesh.” It is a beautiful worship service.

I first heard this song, *In The First Light*, sung by Catherine with the Rhetoric Choir at Lessons and Carols during Catherine’s senior year. I remember telling her afterward, “I love that song!” Supposedly, its songwriter wanted an “all year round” Christmas song. A song that spoke of Christ’s birth but also told the rest of the story. I think that is what I love about it. It encapsulates Christ’s humanity and His holiness.

The progression in the song from Christ as a baby to the Lord of every man is something I experience every Communion Sunday. I know that Christ left heaven and died for us, but I don’t know why it had to be that way. I don’t get it, but it blows me away, and I am so thankful and grateful, all year round.

In Presbyterian Women, we are studying Hebrews, and as I write this, we are looking at being in community with the Living Word (all year round). How we need to listen to God’s word in Scripture and to Christ, who is the Word, and I realize how much there is to listen to in this song...*the soft cries of a newborn, the word of God to man, the telling of His kingdom, the song of life, the angels singing*. I could listen to this song all year round.

Prayer: *Dear Jesus, thank you for coming and living among us. Thank you for songs and Scripture that tell us of your living Word. Help me to be in community with you all year round, to listen to your Word all year round, and to live your Word out in my actions and words. Amen.*

December 14
Scripture Reading for today:

Rob Stillinger
Luke 1:26-34

Angels We Have Heard on High

As a child each Saturday morning I would travel downtown to take piano lessons at Peterson's Music Store. One Christmas season, I expressed to my piano teacher, that I'd like to learn to play "Angels We Have Heard on High". Providing me with an easy piano arrangement, she agreed, and I practiced faithfully each day. Probably to the dismay of my family's ears! My favorite part was playing the "Gloria in excelsis Deo".

Speaking of "Glory to God in the Highest", each day we walk among angels, reminding us to be more Christ-like and better human beings in our journey.

For one year, I have worked with residents of Noah's Ark, a community of special needs adults. These "Angels" teach me to be patient, humble, and have grace. What seems obvious or self-explanatory to me is not always to them. Having to explain, sometimes numerous times, each day and week is a new beginning for them. Moments of joy shine through as they have "a ha" moments. They succeed in what they have learned or accomplished.

Be on the lookout for angels in your life. They are all around us. Sometimes when we least expect them!

Prayer: Lord, We praise your name through the hymns and songs of advent. Angels remind us of your love for us. Please keep us faithful each day of our lives. Help us to grow as Christians as you teach us to forgive and love one another unconditionally. Amen.

December 15
Scripture Reading for today:

Marian Price
Luke 1:46-56

Magnificat

God must love the poor; he made so many of us.

This *Magnificat* is the remarkable praise song that Mary sings, when greeted by her cousin Elizabeth and the unborn John, who leaps in his mother's womb on hearing Mary's voice. Elizabeth immediately recognizes that Mary is "the mother of my Lord" and blesses her.

Each Advent, we read or hear Mary's song. A year ago, we steeped ourselves in this text when our Chancel Choir and the choir from First Presbyterian Maitland performed John Rutter's *Magnificat* in Latin, with an orchestra.

A wonderful and perhaps startling thing about it is Mary's repeated theme, that God's goodness and love are especially bestowed on the poor and humble. Mary herself, a young female in a profoundly patriarchal society, is one of those.

"He has looked with favor upon the lowliness of his servant . . . He has done great things for me . . . His mercy is for those who fear him . . . He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty."

Mary seems to understand already that the Son she will bear will be a new kind of person. He's a divine being who humbles himself and becomes a servant. He's a wise and widely known rabbi who lives out God's ancient—and often disobeyed—command to look after little people, widows and orphans, sinners and prostitutes. He's a sinless person, wrongly persecuted to the death, who asks his Father to forgive his enemies.

Prayer: *Jesus, teach us to humble ourselves and live as servants to the people in our world who are poor in pocket or in body or in spirit. We thank you for always ministering to us in our neediness. Amen*

December 16
Scripture Reading for today:

Linda Castle
Luke 2:1-7

Silent Night

When asked to write a devotion based on a Christmas Carol, I was surprised to see that one of my favorites, *Silent Night*, was still available. I decided to Google it because, Google we must! What I learned made the beautiful carol even more special to me.

Many of you may know the story of how this, the most famous, most recorded and most performed Christmas Carol came to be. The story began 199 years ago on a hilltop overlooking a snow covered Austrian village where Pastor Joseph Mohr was so overcome by the beauty and peace of the scene that he remembered a simple poem he had composed a few years before. It was based on the first chapters of Matthew and Luke, telling the story of the night when the angels announced the birth of the long awaited Messiah. He decided it would be a perfect carol for the Christmas Eve service.

The next day, Mohr was faced with the problem of a damaged church organ and no music to accompany his poem. He walked to the home of the church organist, Franz Gruber, praying all the way for an answer to his dilemma. In only a few hours, Gruber came up with the melody and the two were able to perform the piece that night, accompanied only by Gruber's guitar. When I think of all the music created by the world's most renowned composers for the Christmas Season, the story of *Silent Night* overwhelms me. This simple song was not just written by two men to have music in their little church on Christmas Eve. It was a gift given by God, through the Holy Spirit, to be shared with people around the world for hundreds of years to come.

Prayer: *Dear Heavenly Father, may we all be silent and listen for your words given to us by the Holy Spirit who you left to guide us and bless us here on earth. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

JOY

3rd Sunday of Advent

December 17

Scripture Reading for today:

Anne Gardepe

Luke 2:8-11

While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night

My name is James and I am a shepherd. Yes, it's a low station in life, to be sure, but I feel compelled to tell you about an evening I felt greatly blessed and one I will never forget!

It began as an ordinary night with the other herders and me out in the fields. The animals were pretty quiet so we were just sitting around, looking up at the stars, a little bored, when Matthew spotted something unusual and said, "Hey, look at THAT star!" As we gazed in that direction, the star became brighter and, was it even possible, bigger!

And as if that wasn't enough excitement, an angel suddenly appeared. I will be honest---we were terrified! You should have seen us trembling and covering our faces. But the angel immediately told us we had nothing to fear. In the calmest, most beautiful voice he assured us he had glad tidings of great joy. He said a heavenly babe was just born, our Savior, Christ the Lord. We should go, he said, and he told us how to find this holy child. At that point a shining throng of angels joined him in singing:

*All glory be to God on high,
And to the earth be peace;
Good will, henceforth, from Heaven to men
Begin and never cease.*

Of course, we went straight away and found the child just as the angel described. What an amazing night that was! Just imagine---a lowly keeper of animals ironically invited to witness the coming of the Lamb of God who would be the Good Shepherd of all people. Praise be to God!

Prayer:

Dear Lord, please help us to approach the celebration of the birth of your precious Son with the gratitude, humility and joy of the shepherds. Amen

December 18
Scripture Reading for today:

John Franklin
Luke 2:13, 14

Hark the Herald Angels Sing

This hymn consists of four verses written in 1739 by Charles Wesley. The hymn celebrates God's announcement of his presence coming to earth. An announcement made, not to the kings of earth, but to those who were considered in the lowest station of society at the time.

I love this visual. I can imagine sitting in a dark field, watching the stars, listening to the sound of the sheep. Suddenly, an angelic being bursts forth from the darkness, scaring me half to death. Then this Angel begins telling me that God has come to earth in the form of a baby.

Go and see... Wake up my fellow shepherds! We must go and see this miracle: the babe lying in a manger. I am thinking, "What?! What is this you are telling me?" And then suddenly this glowing Angel is surrounded by other brilliant heavenly beings, singing praises to God.

Our hearts are suddenly changed and we see the truth: the Son of God has been born this day. We must all go to see this babe. We tell all we see as we go along, the words of this angel: *We will die no more! We are given a second birth, free from sin!* I am amazed as we approach this babe lying in the manger, at the sense of peace we feel as all bow down to this babe.

This hymn is the essence of this season. The truth that many times is lost.

Prayer: *Dear God, we thank you for coming to us in this humble and peaceful way. Be with us this season. Help us to slow down. Help us to take time to personalize the real events surrounding your birth. In the name of Jesus. Amen*

December 19
Scripture Reading for today:

Carolyn Ragans
Luke 2:16

Infant Holy, Infant Lowly

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| <i>Infant holy, Infant lowly For His bed a cattle stall; Oxen lowing, little knowing Christ the Babe is Lord of all. Swift are winging Angels singing, Noels ringing, Tidings bringing, Christ the Babe is Lord of all</i> | <i>Flocks were sleeping, Shepherds keeping Vigil till the morning new; Saw the glory, heard the story., Tidings of a Gospel true. Thus rejoicing, free from sorrow, Praises voicing, Greet the morrow, Christ the Babe was born for you!</i> |
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While many of our Christmas carols are of English or German backgrounds, this one is Polish. Its simplicity gives us news of Jesus' birth in short musical phrases which are repeated in such a way that we may carry them with us throughout the day. The news is of strange occurrences: a bed for an infant in a cattle stall and the first news of the birth being brought by angels to simple shepherds. The refrain which answers each piece of this strange news is that this babe was Christ ("God with us") and He is Lord of all.

The second verse suggests that the announcement of this birth was not expected. It was a quiet night for shepherds at their usual business of tending flocks. Suddenly the sky was transformed, the news of the birth of the Christ child was brought by angels, and the shepherds turned to the village where they learned the truth of what they had been told. The carol now calls us into the story to rejoice with this news and realize that Christ the Babe was born not simply for the shepherds so long ago but for us, too! He who said, "Come unto me, all who are heavy laden..." calls us to lay down those things which concern us or weigh us down and to greet the new day with praise. We are not alone. Wherever we may be, God is with us!

Prayer: Lord, sometimes you break in with sight and sound to speak to us in a glorious way. More often, however, you speak in the quiet, simple places of our lives. Open our eyes and ears to watch and listen to you speaking in these days of Advent. We want to not only wonder but to respond to your calling. Amen.

December 20
Scripture Reading for today:

John Gardepe
Luke 1:26-38, 34-38

Mary Did You Know

“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God.” “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May it be as you have said.” Then the angel left her. The SON OF GOD! When I first heard the lyrics in the song “*Mary Did You Know*,” many thoughts came to my mind. I believe the questions that this song raises are ones we think about as we look at our own faith in Jesus and his being the Son of God.

These are some the things asked of Mary regarding her son by the lyricist in the song:

Did she know that He...

- ...would one day walk on water?
- ...would save our sons and daughters?
- ...has come to make us new?
- ...will give sight to a blind man?
- ...will calm the storm with his hand?
- ...has walked where angels trod?
- ...will make the blind see, the deaf hear, the dead live again?
- ...will make the lame leap, the dumb speak the praise of the Lamb?
- ...is Lord of all creation?
- ...would one day rule the nations?
- ...is Heaven’s perfect Lamb?

Mary, did you know the sleeping child you are holding is the great I Am? Although we might have the same questions as those posed to Mary, I do not think the questions are the most important for Mary or for us. God wants only one response. The mother of Jesus, the Son of God, simply answered the angel, “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be as you have said.”

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for your Son, Jesus. Help us to respond as Mary replied to the angel. May we all be faithful servants of the Lord. Amen

December 21

Scripture Reading for today:

Sandy Bogner

Luke 2:20, Nehemiah 8:10

Joy to the World

When I was a little girl, one of our Christmas traditions was to ride around in the car looking at the Christmas lights and displays, singing Christmas carols as we drove.

My parents both sang, and Daddy and we girls would sing the melody while Mother harmonized. This became one of our favorite ways to celebrate Christmas.

Joy to the World is my very favorite Christmas carol, among many favorites! I love them all, really! But *Joy to the World* expresses not only what happened at Christmas, but our faith throughout the year - the Lord is come, and we belong to Him because of it! And although I love the quiet, contemplative hymns of Advent, there's something about belting out our joy at Christ's coming that is irresistible! It is a paraphrase of Psalm 98:

"Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all the earth; make a loud noise, and rejoice, and sing praise. Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills be joyful together before the Lord; for He comes to judge the earth; with righteousness shall He judge the world, and the people with justice and fairness."

Joy to the World must be like the songs that the saints and angels sing before God's throne in Heaven!

*"Joy to the earth! The Savior reigns!
Let all their songs employ;
while fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains,
Repeat the sounding joy!"*

Nehemiah says, "The joy of the Lord is our strength.(Neh. 8:10) Joy is the theme of the whole Advent season, the joy that God Himself came into the world and made it possible for us to live eternally!

Prayer: *Lord we praise you for what you have done for us! Thank you for the joy we have in Jesus Christ and His Advent into the world. we pray that, in your Spirit, we will each have that joy whatever our circumstances, at Christmas and always. Amen.*

December 22
Scripture Reading for today:

Peggy Howland
Luke 2:18

Mary's Boy Child

*"Long time ago in Bethlehem so the Holy Bible say,
Mary's boy child Jesus Christ was born on Christmas Day."*

I love the Calypso singing of Harry Belafonte, so this has been a favorite of mine for many years. The story is told in the words of humble folks like Mary and Joseph must have been. I would love to sing it for you!

*"Now Joseph and his wife, Mary, come to Bethlehem that night,
them find no place to born she child, not a single room was in sight.
By and by they find a little nook in a stable all forlorn,
and in a manger cold and dark, Mary's little boy was born."*

And the simple, humble story breaks forth into joy after each verse,

*"Hark now, hear the angels sing a new king born today!
And we shall live for evermore because of Christmas Day."*

Such a story! Grace and love, and a message from the humblest of beginnings that the heavens have opened, for God has reached out to humankind! No wonder there are angels and choirs and music!

*"While shepherds watched their flocks by night,
they saw a bright and shining star, they heard a choir sing,
the music seemed to come from afar."*

Into the cold and dark comes light. Into the hardships and trials comes hope. God has come to be with us, and earth is filled with singing!

*"Hark now, hear the angels sing a new king born today.
And we shall live for evermore because of Christmas Day.
Trumpets sound and angels sing, a new king born today,
And we shall live for evermore because of Christmas Day!"*

Prayer: Thank you, God, for breaking through our trials and accompanying us on our journey, bringing us joy and singing and Jesus! Amen.

December 23
Scripture Reading for today:

Christa Hyatt
Matthew 2:1, 2

We Three Kings

This hymn is a story of the journey of the Magi to Bethlehem bearing gifts representing royalty, deity and foretelling the death of Christ. It is a song rejoicing in the birth of a child born in a stable who came to save the world from sin.

The music of Christmas is magical and spiritual and helps to get us all in the mood to celebrate and give thanks for our many blessings. Our songs of faith at Christmas help to ground us in the true meaning of the season and help us reflect on our religious beliefs.

At my house when I was growing up, my father would come home from work every night and play music. He had 33 1/3 vinyl albums as well as 78's. He also had hundreds of reel to reel tapes with bands and singers from the 30's, 40's, 50's, 60's and 70's. Bing Crosby, Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra, Andy Williams, Doris Day, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Dinah Shore, Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey, and Count Basie were all familiar names and their music was played often.

At Christmas, my Dad played all of his Christmas albums including secular songs as well as religious hymns. I have wonderful memories of Bing Crosby's *White Christmas* as well as Andy Williams singing *Silent Night, Holy Night*. (YouTube has it all!)

Prayer: Thank you Lord for giving us your son and help us to remember the true meaning of Christmas. Be with us as we celebrate this time of year through music and prayer. Thank you for your gift of our wonderful choir at Park Lake as they present us with their wonderful gifts of music and voice. Amen.

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 24

Scripture Reading for today:

Jane Callahan

Luke 2:11, Isaiah 9:6

For Unto Us a Child is Born - The Messiah

He was in the world and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.

As I read the above passage from the Book of John, I was reminded of the first time I thought about religion and about church other than being a place my parents made me go to every Sunday. That occurred when I bought the album *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Listening to the album while reading along with the lyrics seemed to bring the story of Christ's story and final days into sharper focus.

The lyrics from the song *Superstar* were particularly intriguing to me.

*Now why'd you choose such a backward time
And such a strange land?
If you'd come today
You could have reached a whole nation*

Israel in 4 B.C had no mass communication.

For a usually distracted teenager who had been going through the motions in Sunday School and at church, I for the first time actually spent time reflecting on what would happen if Jesus was to come during my lifetime. Would I recognize him? Would I be open to receiving his message. Or would I be like a lot of my peers at the time, jaded and cynical? I would like to say that at the age of 14 I had an epiphany and that everything became clear, but the only thing I remember is that because of these reflections, I started to pay more attention to the teachings of Jesus in the Bible and tried to be a better person and live the life that he taught. And while I know at times I still fall short, I continue to try to live that life.

Prayer: *Dear Heavenly Father, as we celebrate the birth of your son, please allow us to be reminded that sharing your love is the best gift of all and we have been blessed with this gift from you. Amen.*

LOVE

December 25

Scripture Reading for today:

Rosalyn Russell

Psalm 33

I Danced in the Morning

*“And I came down from heaven and
I danced on the earth – At Bethlehem I had my birth.”*

Christmas morning is a time of dancing. The children and grandchildren are having a hard time waiting for their presents. Grandparents and Mom and Dads are excited to watch the joy on their faces as they open their presents.

The Christ child has arrived after many years of waiting. The Angels are singing. The wise men are worshipping. And WE are celebrating. What a joy it is to think of being there to dance for the Christ child.

We can still dance. As Mary said in a song, I give you all I have for your plan. Your plan is that the world will be saved by One Small Lamb. We can sing, feed the poor, and love the unloved.

As we leave the Christmas Eve service let us sing and dance rejoicing that our Savior has come. Oh, how very much Christ loves us!

“Dance, then, wherever you maybe. I am the Lord of the dance said he.”

Prayer: *We pray to our Lord, the one who dances for us every day, loving us, forgiving us: May we be as loving and caring for others as You are for us. Amen*