

An Introduction

Thank you for picking up a copy of the Advent Devotions by members and friends of Park Lake Presbyterian Church. This is a yearly 'offering' by the church to assist personal journeys through the season of Advent, a season in the church year designed to prepare us for Christmas. We hope that the stories compiled in these pages help you prepare.

Our writers were given the prompt of "pondering" at Christmas. In Luke 1, the story goes that the angel visited Mary to tell her that she was the one chosen to bear God's Christ. "How can this be?" Mary asked the angel, and then listed the reasons it didn't make sense. Later in Luke 2 when the baby had been born, shepherds showed up at the manger telling Mary and Joseph all that the angels had revealed to them about their newborn son. It jived with what Mary had heard, 'BUT,' reads the Scripture, "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." Eugene Peterson translates in *The Message*, "...All who heard the shepherders were impressed. Mary kept all these things to herself, holding them dear, deep within herself." In contrast to the shepherds who were just racing off telling and glorifying, Mary was quiet. Ponderous.

So, we asked our writers and we ask you: What do you "ponder" at Christmas? What wonders of Christmas arise that you just don't have immediate words for? What stories of Christmas do YOU have that make you ponder Christmas's meaning? What could the Lord be doing in your life? Maybe as you read their stories, your own stories will rise up. I hope they do.

Thank you to Carol Bookhardt, Anne Vercheski and the Christian Education Committee for their editorial help!

May blessings and ponderings be yours this Christmas, my friends.

Helen DeBevoise, Co-Pastor

Saturday, December 1

Dan DeBevoise

After the shepherds breathlessly blurt out everything that happened to them and stand there gawking at the baby, Luke says, “But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her own heart.”

“Mary treasured and pondered” everything the Shepherds said. I’ve always pictured Mary at this moment, kneeling by her newborn’s cradle and beaming with pride, while kindly visitors peer over her shoulder. Maybe she has a faraway look in her eyes as she envisions this baby growing up, running around the carpenter shop, later working side by side with Joseph, and perhaps one day bringing his own child to meet her. What young new mother wouldn’t treasure such possibility or ponder such a future?

However, Luke describes Mary’s reaction in contrast to everyone else: “All who heard it were amazed at what the Shepherds told them. But Mary, treasured and pondered.” The gospel writers will tell how people are frequently “amazed” at what Jesus says and does throughout his life. Only Mary “treasures and ponders”. In contrast to everyone else’s amazement, Mary “treasures and ponders”.

Maybe Mary invites us to be present during Advent and Christmas in a different way.

I confess I’m usually anxious for everything about this season to be “amazing”. I want the things that have grown dull and dim over the last year(s) to be transformed by all the lights, decorations, music, and merriment seasonally possible. I want the dim places outside and inside myself to be brighter.

What if Mary wasn’t in the center of the amazement that filled everyone else gathered around the shepherds and manger? I think I see Mary off by herself, standing guardedly in the shadows, right at the edge of the darkness where she can discern the holy mystery of God’s presence in this new life. What if Mary is in the space where it is revealed that something more, or other, or greater is present in life? The Holy Mystery of God’s presence that we often miss in our attention to amazement. I think Mary invites us to stand with her, where you can treasure and ponder and see God with us.

Dear God, in the midst of everything that I am so easily amazed by, when I am distracted by everything that grabs my attention, help me to stand with Mary and deeply ponder the mystery of your holy presence in my life and the world. Amen.

Sunday, December 2

First Sunday of Advent

Susan Frith

A Rag-Tag Nativity

We look pretty silly in the photo: my husband, John, sporting an old graduation gown, my pregnant self in mismatched layers, and our utterly confused mini schnauzer squeezed into a hand-knitted sweater vest. It's Christmas Eve 14 years ago. We've chosen to show up as wise man, shepherd and sheep for a come one, come all nativity at Old Pine Street Presbyterian, a Philadelphia church that dates back to Colonial times. On this particular night, the sanctuary hosts magi and shepherds aplenty, as well as assorted manger animals—even someone's pet rat. No one has bothered to rehearse. No one has bothered to coordinate costumes. The result is a far cry from the orderly scenes you find on Christmas cards.

Though some might disapprove of the rag-tag, live-animal nativity, one could argue it was actually in keeping with the colorful early history of that church. It accommodated firebrand preachers, Revolutionary War patriots, and at one point even horses, when taken over by British troops.

But mostly what I bring away from that night is a sense of gratitude, knowing how generations have journeyed to that place, to Park Lake, and other houses of worship, bearing different gifts and imperfections, different hopes and needs, and found shelter. That we don't match but somehow fit together, and through Christ's birth, life, and death, there is room for us all, is a testament to God's faithfulness.

O Lord, you welcome each of us in all our varied imperfections. Help us remember to do the same with others as we celebrate Christ's birth this Advent season. Amen.

Monday, December 3

Rob Stillinger

Of all the Christmas memories I have experienced throughout the years, one has stood out continually. In the autumn of 1988, my Dad arrived home from a local recording studio with recorded instrumental music. This music would be used for a secular lighting ceremony pageant on Church Street in downtown Burlington the day after Thanksgiving. He shared this music with me as I listened in anticipation and wonder. The words had not yet been recorded; however, I read the scripted words as I listened to the final song, "This Little Light":

This Little Light of Mine

Please, Let it Freely Shine
Shine 'Round the World for All to See
This Little Light of Mine
Your Little Light So True, Shine in the Night for You
It Reaches Out For All to See, Your Little Light so True
This Small Light can Make a Diff'rence
With its Tiny Glow
When It Comes from in the Heart, the Brightness Grows and Grows
This Little Light of Mine
Please Let it be a Sign
Shining for Peace Around the World, This Little Light of Mine
Please Let it Freely Shine!

Thirty years later, with my Christian faith and anticipation of Advent, the words of this song help me focus on Mary and her special miracle for the world.

*Lord, with the anticipation of Advent, help us remember Mary and the birth of Jesus.
Keep our hearts and minds on your Salvation. Amen.*

Tuesday, December 4

John Franklin

As I look back at my Christmas memories I am troubled. I had a guardian, a snowbird, (my cousin, Allison's mother), but she never had time for me. This was the reason for me being with different family every year. "Who is going to take Johnny this year?" extended family would ask. After I turned twenty-one and out on my own, I spent a number of Christmases alone. I remember walking through the city one Christmas feeling very alone and left out. I came to dread the holidays.

Through a series of events, I was reconnected with Cousin Allison (it was always easier to call her my sister) and we began trying to create the perfect Christmas with gifts, food, decor, parties. After several years, Allison convinced me to start going to church again. I was now fifty and had left the church in my early twenty's. I was introduced to Park Lake and the love and care I found here. By focusing on the church events, Christmas began to have meaning. From Advent to Christmas Eve, I have come to love the Scriptures that lead us to the birth of the Christ Child. Christmas now has meaning. Allison is now gone, and John Rachey and I only have each other, but we are a family. Now I have a family of my own, with Christ at the center. I do spend time pondering all of these things at this time of the year.

Dear Lord, I thank you for bringing me through another year. I take the time to reflect on the ways you were present through the events of the year: the joys, the sad times, the special events, and the quiet times where I could just sit back and think of you. Many of those times I see where you have carried me in your arms, and I thank you. I lift up praise to you Lord Jesus. Amen.

Wednesday, December 5

Missy Kamrad

Here Comes Santa Claus

I called him "Da". He was my mother's father and my grandfather. A true "child at heart", he always gave my mother a Christmas toy that he could enjoy playing with, too. One of my earliest memories was sitting on his lap and "playing" cribbage (his favorite card game). I would hold my cards, he would play both hands, but I would move the pegs.....and of course win the game!

My grandparents moved to Indian River City (just south of Titusville where route 50 runs into U.S. 1) in the mid-40's, and shortly thereafter, we drove from Michigan to Florida to visit them. It was late the evening of Christmas Eve when we arrived. Soon there was a knock at the front door. Da asked me to answer it. When I had the surprise of my young life! There stood Santa, red suit and all, with presents in hand, joyfully "ho-ho-ho-ing" all the way in. With shaking hands, I helped him put the gifts under the tree - including one for my mother! He joined us to have cookies and cocoa and then, as fast as he had arrived, he was gone - "Ho-ho-ho-ing" into the night.

It was very late now, and we were all exhausted. I climbed into bed with my grandmother as I always did when visiting. We snuggled up and began saying our bedtime prayers together. When it was my turn I thanked God for our safe trip and for giving me an evening I would never forget! Then we prayed together the prayer she had taught me: *"Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take". Amen.*

Lord, thank you for the memories of loved ones that Christmas brings. These are people who shaped us. May we help pass along good times of love and your gift of Jesus to others. Amen

Thursday December 6
Scripture Reading for today:

Tom Pinnel
Luke 1:26-45

Advent is full of excitement and expectation, yet it is also about waiting. After the angel visited Mary, giving her the news of the unexpected pregnancy, she went off to be with Elizabeth, her cousin, and stayed with her for three months. Her waiting was shared with and supported by family in anticipation of the blessed birth.

Family was also an important part of our Christmas, when we lived in New Jersey and I was the pastor of the South Presbyterian Church in Bergenfield. We looked forward with great expectation to Christmas Eve. Our family gathered at our home in the afternoon for our gift exchange and our traditional Christmas Roast Beef Dinner. When the children were still young there were twelve of us around the dining room table. The house was full of excitement and chatter. There was also the expectation of the Christmas Eve Service in the historic sanctuary which would follow dinner.

In anticipation of the evening service, the children, joined the adults in preparing luminaries which were placed along the sidewalk from our home to the Church. In those days, we used brown paper bags, sand and actual candles. It was a beautiful sight, especially when there was snow on the ground. Luminaries initially were a Spanish tradition. They believed they lit the way for the Spirit of the Christ child to enter the home or sanctuary on Christmas Eve.

Worshippers were guided to the door of the Church by the luminaries lining the walk. They waited in anticipation for the service of candlelight, carol singing, special music and the meditation on the birth of Jesus. The Spirit of the Christ child was truly present and we felt blessed.

Advent, a season that begins in anticipation and ends in the blessing of God with us.

Lord, teach us to embrace the wait. To anticipate your presence in the slow pace of unplanned moments. May those moments find us on our way to Christmas. Amen.

Friday, December 7

Walk Jones

This fall, Nancy and I visited Bethlehem. There were several opportunities to ponder the story of Jesus' birth, thinking about the shepherds, Magi, and angels. With Christian pilgrims from around the world, we visited holy sites. We heard songs and lectures in Korean, Portuguese, and French and groups of Christians worshiped around us.

We were in a small church near the shepherds' fields when a leader in our group told the Christmas story from Luke. We prayed and thought about the angels' news and shepherds' wonder. Then in that stone church with a high ceiling, someone began singing "Joy to the World" and our voices echoed around the small sanctuary. It was beautiful! Some in our tour group began singing in parts. Wow.

As those carols echoed around the stone church, I felt that Christmas joy I've felt many other years. I thought about singing carols in various churches I've belonged to or served. In Bethlehem. I prayed for friends and family. I wondered what the angels sounded like as they sang "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace..." It would be even more beautiful than part-singing Protestants in a small stone church in the land of Jesus birth. What a glorious sound it must have been.

I'm still pondering all that we saw and heard in Israel. I think about the rocks and hills that heard the Angels singing to shepherds and sheep. I felt spiritual and close to God while in that holy land, like I do on Christmas Eve at Park Lake Church.

Dear Lord, we worship you in many languages in countries around the world. Help us as we celebrate Jesus' first coming and wait for the second coming of the Prince of Peace. Give joy to your world this season and all year. Amen.

Saturday, December 8
Scripture Reading for today:

Don DeBevoise
John 3:16

When I read that Helen had chosen as the theme for this year's Advent devotionals, "Your favorite Christmas memory" my thoughts turned to the Christmas Eve service. Not one Christmas Eve service, but the Christmas Eve services Joyce, my wife, and I had shared over the years. I realized this would be the first time in 65 years she will not be with me for Christmas Eve.

I remembered the beauty of those Christmas Eve series, the sanctuary overflowing with people. I remembered how I would look out over the congregation until I spotted Joyce and our eyes would connect for one special moment. I thought about the beautiful Christmas trees and wreath and other Christmas decorations that grace the sanctuary on Christmas Eve, the beautiful Christmas anthems, and the singing of the Christmas carols. I thought of how I had shared with many in similar circumstances as mine during the Christmas season. I remembered how I had said on many of those occasions the Christmas experience reminds us of the hope that sustains us; and I thought to myself, it is true! That life which was begun at Christmas and climaxed at Easter says to us that death is not the end, life is eternal.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

Joy to the World the Lord has come!" Amen.

Sunday, December 9

Second Sunday of Advent

Sarah Walker

Big News!

The Christmas I was in second grade, my extended family rented a beach house on Anna Maria Island off Florida's Gulf Coast. This was particularly exciting for Alison and me. We knew a beach house during Christmas meant different bedrooms, new hiding spots, and going out to eat often. It also meant beachcombing and birdwatching, dancing to carols played on the portable keyboard, and all eight of us helping to decorate that year's Yule Log cake (a big family tradition). However, it also came with its own unexpected challenges.

For example, the adults had forgotten about what we'd do for a tree, so two days before Christmas, we frantically searched and found a quaint one on clearance for \$1. We also didn't have a tree stand, so we bought a plastic orange Home Depot bucket, filled it with bricks, and covered it in wrapping paper. Of course, being eight, I didn't care so much about the tree's looks, but rather what was under it. Another surprise was when the house washing machine overflowed. This situation sounds like nothing when I type it out, but at the time I was thoroughly convinced the island was going to sink under all that water pouring down into the kitchen from the second floor. I remember pretending to be a news reporter, taping up a detailed map of the rooms in the house and where the water was going, and updating it regularly. For me, it was a big news story, and so is the real meaning behind Christmas.

Lord, help us remember the meaning of Christmas with the excitement of children again, and to share that good news with others. Amen.

Monday, December 10
Scripture Reading for today:

Erin Cook
Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Two People are Better Than One

Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble. Likewise, two people lying close together can keep each other warm. But how can one be warm alone? A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken. (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, NLT)

My Christmas memories are bountiful, but the thing I've always loved about Christmas, is being with family and friends. Watching the same cheesy Christmas movies year after year, waking up and enjoying breakfast casserole and popcorn balls and the lazy conversations after all the hoopla.

My sister and I recently got our sister tattoos – wishbones. Wishbones you say?!? Yes! We based our decision on the many times we broke the wishbone at Thanksgiving. The wishbone would sit on my grandparents' kitchen counter, and we'd have to wait for it to dry before we could snap it apart and see who ended up with the "lucky" piece. This is now Emma and RC's job and that makes our hearts happy. So, the wishbone represents us and our family and togetherness and perhaps yummy turkey.

On a recent trip to Illinois, we found just the four of us in the car together and then out for drinks. It's been a while since it was just mom, dad, sis and me. It was like old times – eye rolls in the backseat between Melissa and me, and mom and dad deciding which route is the best one to take, and then a toast to being nice to each other, to remember how much family means to us.

And on that trip to Illinois, I felt how much love can come from those that are not blood related. There are just those people who will always have the door open, fresh towels, a car to loan and some of the best hugs you can receive and can't wait to give.

Lord, I pray that no one in your family feels alone this Christmas; that we may have your strength and love to be that person always willing to give and receive a hug. Amen.

Tuesday, December 11
Scripture Reading for today:

Carol Bookhardt
Luke 1:26-38

Mary did you know?

As I waited for my baby girl to be born almost 19 years ago on December 24, 1999, I pondered how Mary felt waiting for her baby that night so long ago. I went into labor on December 23rd, two weeks before Delaney was due. I was not prepared for a Christmas baby! I had gifts to wrap, a hospital bag to pack and, I didn't really want to be in the hospital on Christmas! I had my sweet 5-year-old Kaley who was waiting in anticipation for her Christmas dreams to come true! This Christmas baby was really putting a cramp in my planning! Mary's preparations for her baby were a lot different from mine. She didn't have a shopping list or cookies to bake. Was she ready for her baby? Was she prepared?

Thinking of Mary, I am drawn to the song "Mary, did you know?" We enjoy listening to it on the radio during Christmas. The first two lines of the lyrics ask, "Mary did you know, that your baby boy will one day walk on water? Mary did you know, that your baby boy would save our sons and daughters?". Mary was blessed to have this amazing child who would save the world. Did she know the joy and pain that would come with raising this child and seeing him die on the cross? Take a moment to read the lyrics to "Mary Did You Know?" which is printed in the back of the Advent booklet.

We pray and ponder over our children, hoping they will grow up to be happy, productive citizens. Parenting is equally overwhelming and rewarding. It takes a lot of faith to parent. God knew that Mary had the faith, strong enough to be Christ's mother. I wonder if she felt overwhelmed with the responsibility that God entrusted her with.

My precious Christmas baby Delaney is all grown up now and in college (we always tell her that she is the best Christmas gift ever). Our Kaley graduated from college and is working an adult job. We are so proud of both of them! Someday, they will ponder the future of their children, just like me, just like Mary.

Dear Lord, help us to remember to take time to ponder the true meaning of Christmas, the best Christmas gift to the world, Mary's precious baby boy, our Savior, Christ the Lord. Amen.

Wednesday, December 12

Linda Castle

Through my life, there have been many special Christmas experiences from childhood wishes coming true to spending my last Christmas with my dad. He was a vibrant young farm boy and athlete. Several of his trophies remain in his small high school nearly 100 years later. In his thirties, he was struck down by polio and never regained much use of his legs. The way a one year old walks by grabbing on to furniture or a wall is how he spent the remainder of his life. He did not go many places that did not accommodate the handicapped. One of those places for him was church. His last Christmas with us was a day of joy and tears. I remember waking up that night and standing in the hallway while he watched a movie, "The Robe". I knew he was communicating with the Lord in his own way, and I felt His presence there with us. My dad was gone two days later, and I was so glad to have had that moment with him.

Another special Christmas experience came much later in my life. It was a long, stressful year as my husband, Gary, was in ICU for weeks and continued his recovery at home through the rest of the year. We had been away from Park Lake for awhile and the prayers Dan offered at Gary's bedside and the support of members of this congregation brought us home. A few days before Christmas, I got a call asking if the church carolers could come by our house that night. When they arrived, I opened the door expecting 8 or 10 people there. Instead, our entire front yard was full of familiar faces and their singing filled the air. We stood on our front porch and felt the love of God surround us. If you are asked to go caroling or do something else for others, please do. That gesture may become a very special Christmas memory for them and for you.

Dear Heavenly Father, During this Advent season we are waiting for the gift of your Son that you gave so freely that we might have eternal life, We pray for our families that we have loved all our lives and for our church family that we have grown to love as well. Blessings to all. Amen.

Thursday, December 13

Rev. Peggy Howland

As I meditated on how young Mary treasured the words and “pondered in her heart” the awesome events surrounding Jesus’ birth, I recalled a little poem I started years ago...

Jesus was a baby who pooped in his pants
and cried in the night.
There, there, baby, it’s all right:
God is in love with the world.

Jesus was a boy who climbed a tree
and skinned his knee.
There, there, Jesus, it’s all right:
God is in love with the world.

Young Mary surely had her share of daily difficulties and challenging experiences as a new mother.

There, there, Mary, it’s all right: God is in love with the world!

We all live our lives day by day and year by year facing new adventures, surprising moments, bewildering events, a myriad of changes that come with growing up and growing older. There, there, child of God, it’s all right: God is in love with the world.

Some times are more difficult than others. We live in a world full of new experiences that seem overwhelming, even cataclysmic events for which no solutions seem forthcoming. Gun violence gone mad, political upheaval and fractious divisions, nature’s untamable fury, fire and flood, wars and rumors of wars, suffering children and refugees caught in events that cry out for justice and mercy. Plus the little personal annoyances that come unexpectedly every single day...

We need a little Christmas, right this very minute. We need a little Christmas now. We need the assurance of that eternal message of Christmas: God is in love with the world.

Thank you, God, for the gifts of hope and love that you gave us with the birth of Jesus. Help me to live this day trusting in your love that surrounds me, sharing that love with those who touch my life today. Amen.

Friday, December 14
Scripture Reading for today:

Eleanor Hummert
Luke 1 and 2

Are You Waiting for God to Answer Your Prayers?

Zechariah and Elizabeth were obedient to the Lord from their hearts and lived in God's favor. They had longed for a child for many years. God sent an angel, Gabriel, to deliver a message to Zechariah that they would have a son, who would be named John.

If we want our prayers to be answered, we must be open to God and obedient, for He will and can do all things - even the seemingly impossible. We must ask, trust and wait patiently for God to act in His own timing, at the moment and in His own way.

We may feel unworthy for asking God's favor, but if we are sincere and believe, He can use each of us for His purposes. In the same manner, God sent Gabriel to Mary, a virgin betrothed to Joseph and told her she would have a son and his name would be Jesus, the Messiah.

God is at work in all of the world and in all of us who are obedient and faithful. Do you still see Jesus as a baby in a manger? Or is He the Lord of your life? Trust in Him always! Nothing is impossible if we only believe.

Dear Lord, open our hearts to your son and your calling for each of us. Help us to ask, trust and be obedient. Even if our prayers are not answered to our undivided desires, we know that it has meaning for your plan in him. Amen.

Saturday, December 15

Alice and Dana Schmidt

When we lived in Rochester NY, starting from when the children were very young and continuing until we moved down here, we usually had an international grad student or an international student and family visit with us on Christmas Day. The students enjoyed our children and we all enjoyed getting to know them. They came from Japan, Korea, Lebanon, France, Taiwan, Germany, all over the world. We exchanged presents and ate, and ate, and ate, and talked and laughed and told stories and laughed some more.

As a little girl, Cindy says she remembers being given an intricate jewel box from an Asian student. The panels had to be pushed this way and that, in a certain order, to slide the lid over and access the contents. She thought it was the most magical thing.

Usually by Christmas time, our international friends had good enough English that we could pretty much understand each other. For many of these families, we already had met them, when they arrived, then several times over the year. In fact, the students were most often with us ON holidays when they could not effectively return home for that brief time. One holiday, the first winter for this family from the Near East, their little boy and our little son spent all morning sledding down our snowy steep front yard over and over. We dragged them in to eat with the rest of us, then out they went again.

I remember one time, we met a German family whose children spoke no English. We brought a ball to the playground outside their apartment. The four children had a wonderful couple of hours with the ball, getting to know each other.

I remember another time, having two young mothers, one from Korea, the other from Japan, as our friends. They lived on the same floor and were close friends. I asked if they spoke their own languages to each other and they explained to me that those languages are totally different and their common language was English, which neither had known when they arrived. I asked how they had made friends with each other. They said they smiled at each other.

We Schmidts wonder sometimes why UCF does not have a similar program offering foreign students and Americans a chance to join together on holidays.

Where was God? Obviously with all of us. I don't remember if we talked about Jesus's birth and why we celebrated Christmas; perhaps we did with some of our guests. But we certainly showed love of neighbor to each other, us to them and them to us. These were blessed holidays.

Dear Lord, help us to show love to our neighbors no matter who they are and share the good news of this Advent season. Amen

Sunday, December 16

Third Sunday of Advent

Casey Cox

The shepherds went to Bethlehem and found Joseph, Mary and their swaddled child resting on straw in a feed trough. The shepherds told anyone who'd listen what they'd seen and heard and found. Probably raised quite a commotion. Mary had seen and spoken to angels before, but she hadn't seen her child until that night. Now complete strangers were showing up happy and rejoicing. Mary was probably tired. Childbirth is a painful and messy ordeal, an omega and an alpha, an end and a beginning. Maybe she'd been thinking the hard part was over. Then the shepherds showed up. Perhaps then she pondered the prophecies and worried about the future. Perhaps she prayed for God to grant her child a long and happy life.

Our daughter Madison was the best Christmas gift I've ever received. Karen went into labor on Christmas Day, 1995. Twenty-seven hours later she was in the operating room having a Cesarean. Iron Mountain General, a small hospital in a small town, had two ORs and one waiting room. The woman in the other operating room, equally pregnant, had been injured in an auto accident and lost her child. As happy as our family was the other family was as devastated. Our joy was tempered with their grief. I'd been in their shoes and prayed for the Lord to give them solace. Then I thanked the Lord for my second chance and promised to be the best parent I could possibly be.

Lord, for many of us, Christmas is filled with joys as well as sorrows. We pray that as we ponder the wonder of your gift to live with us and as one of us that we might be open to the ways in which you want to lead us toward a better way of living, beginning with a child. In Him we ask it. Amen.

Monday, December 17

Anne Vercheski

When I was a child, I attended Epiphany Catholic School. During Advent, our class would go to a local nursing home to carol. I hated going. I felt very uncomfortable and couldn't wait until we left.

It is remarkable now, because as an adult, one of my favorite evenings during Advent is caroling with our Park Lake family. I look forward to caroling at Westminster Towers and rehab centers and homes. It amazes me how the people we visit – and folks around them - know the carols by heart. Some may not appear alert or aware of our presence, but once we begin singing, they begin singing too. “Away in a manger, no crib for a bed, the little Lord Jesus lay down His sweet head.” “Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright.” These sweet souls have these words hidden in their hearts.

One particularly touching memory is when we caroled to Dave Foley just weeks before his passing. Once we had finished singing, lying in his bed, he tightly held my hand and told me that he was praying for Rebecca and her school, The Geneva School, which was his granddaughter, Rachel's, school too. We were there to bless Dave, but there he was blessing us. I cried. What a wonderful witness he was of walking closely with a wonderful God!

So, I ponder these experiences of caroling. Of words hidden in hearts reminding us of Jesus – Immanuel – God with us. Of unexpected blessings. Of knowing that God is with us throughout our lives, no matter our circumstances, from beginning to end.

Dear Lord, thank you for being with us - always. Thank you for blessing us with wonderous carols of the birth of your son and for our Park Lake family. Please help us to bless one another and to walk closely with You - always. Amen.

Tuesday, December 18

David Simmons

Growing up in Florida at Christmastime, I always felt a little excluded by our greater culture. In stores, in the books at school, and on TV, Christmas was portrayed as so many things that had nothing to do with me. People wearing mittens, hats, heavy coats; having fires in fireplaces, ice skating. And snow! What in the world was that? Even beloved cultural icons like Snoopy's house were suddenly festooned with that white stuff I knew nothing about. And don't get me started on the songs (I'm looking at you, Frosty! Really, a snowman that talked! A snowman would have been astounding here, even the regular mute kind.)

My family tried to winter-up the holiday, with varying success. Tinsel icicles on the tree got us kids excited (until we were admonished to drape them filament by filament and not just pelt the tree with them; there goes the fun.) Each child got to make a "Christmas scene" in the living room, using our best Lincoln log architecture and ornaments and figurines saved over the years. These were set up on a "bed of snow" that I think is actually called batting and used to stuff quilts. The roofs of our little cabins we sprayed with some kind of white substance that came out of an aerosol can; it could also be used to make the windows of the home look "frosty" (what was that stuff, asbestos?). I recall one year, I was inconsolable thinking that our house's lack of a chimney and fireplace would mean that Santa would have to skip us, despite my parents attempts to reassure me that they would just leave the screen door unlocked.

I see now with gratitude that, at my first church home, First Presbyterian Maitland, I learned the deeper meaning of Christmas. Sure, we sang songs about bleak mid-winters, and snow deep and crisp and even. But also I was taught that God loved us, all of us, so much that he sent us his Son to bless us. I learned that not only kings and wise men but also simple shepherds came to worship him. At church, I too felt included. Here I was part of the children's choir that sang and put on pageants, and here were people that weren't even my family, but who told me and showed me that they cared about me.

On Christmas Eve, we got to go to church and it wasn't even Sunday! And after the service, back at home by the tree my parents would read Luke's gospel account of the Nativity. I am grateful to still have a church of inclusion, where I can celebrate the amazing good news of Christ's birth.

Lord God, teach us the hospitality of Christmas where many different people gathered at your manger and all felt the warmth of welcome. Amen.

Wednesday, December 19

Sandy Bogner

At some point when I was a young girl, my sisters and I went shopping at Christmastime with our mother at Woolworth's 5 & 10. I don't remember what Mother was shopping for, but as we wandered around the store, we girls found the most wonderful thing we had ever seen - a manger scene! Being Baptist, we had never seen such a thing before. Mary, Joseph, the baby Jesus, shepherds, angels, wise men, all made out of paste and painted in bright colors! And even a barn! The figures were small - about 4 inches tall, but it was beautiful in our eyes. The barn even had a place for a Christmas tree bulb in the back, which in our house was always blue.

From that time on, all of our pondering about the mystery of Christmas was done in front of that manger scene, with its cotton snow surrounding it. One year, my sister Pat and I came home from college for Christmas to find that although the house was decorated to the rafters with greenery, ornaments, red candles and tinsel, there was no manger scene to be seen. In Mother's opinion, it was too timeworn and tacky to fit in. So we waited until she left the house, and we dug it out of its box and set it up, complete with snow, on top of the TV. Now Christmas could be pondered and embraced and fully celebrated!

We all still love a good nativity scene - or even a "bad" one - and ponder the miracle of Christmas when we look at them.

Lord, we know that every earthly king starts out as a little baby, but the King of Kings and Lord of Lords?! That will have us pondering until the end of time! Thank you for loving us enough to do such a wonderful thing for us, for sending yourself to be with us. Amen.

Thursday, December 20

John Walker

This year will be the first Christmas I have celebrated without my father. Bill Walker who died on July 13th, while I was working in South America. I didn't make it home in time before he died, but I did get home in time to speak at his funeral. So this year, like many people, I carry someone with me in a different way throughout Advent.

Let me tell you one thing about him: Bill Walker loved books. Of all the effects of his Alzheimer's, one of the cruelest was that it stopped him from really reading. But even through that difficult phase at the end of his life, he never did forget how much he loved books, and he returned to them over and over. And he did certainly take pride in reading stories to us, at least certain stories. At holidays, Dad used to read aloud from Carl Sandburg's Rutabaga stories, which could be very, very silly indeed.

So I have a suggestion for a different kind of Advent devotional. If you can, try to find a good book—maybe at home, or in a library, or on the internet, and read some of it, maybe even all of it. And then, and this is the important part, get together and tell somebody else about what you read. Pull that conversation out of the book and into the world, and share it with somebody else. That's going to be one of the things that helps me think about Advent in this world that is now so different from last year.

Dear God, help us remember all the people who are with us at Christmas time, and all of those who are not. When we read your word, help us to share it and bring about a little bit more community and fellowship here in Orlando. In Jesus name, Amen.

Friday, December 21

Meredith Hampton

Certain actions in our culture around the holidays serve as the spark that sets the anticipation in motion for the upcoming Season. For the Clark Griswald types, when they get to untangle their Christmas light collection and once again place them on their home for neighbors (and the world) to know how tidings of Comfort and Joy are to be celebrated soon, the Christmas joy is felt. I did not have a Clark Griswald for a dad; instead, I had a dad whose Christmas humor centered around “Ba humbug” jokes. If I ponder enough, I can hear him mockingly sing “Christmas Bells those Christmas Bells,” and feel a child-like laughter in my heart. Each year when the car radio plays familiar Christmas tunes that have not been heard since December 25th from the prior year -- I no doubt feel the air is lighter with happiness (even if the weather is hot and muggy) and thoughts of tidings of Comfort and Joy come to me.

The air was a little heavier though the year when I was twenty-one and my father passed away Thanksgiving morning. The unexpected absence of his mocking the season brought me a great sadness. As much as I still wanted to be excited for Christmas that year, my grieving mind felt that somehow all the lyrics from the radio’s songs were directed right at me -- especially the pop-song “Where are you Christmas?” by Faith Hill. I had no answer. While I wish I could give you some sound biblical verse on how I could have found it, I discovered that just showing up to be with family, friends, and fellow church members during the month of December meant the tidings of Comfort and Joy could somehow find me. A feeling of loss and sadness can try, but the start of Christmas music comes each year to signal for me that it is time to once again wait. Anticipate. Joy to the World – the Lord is coming!

Gracious God, we thank you for bringing Jesus to the world. As we ponder on the sadness and brokenness that fills our families, the homes of neighbors and our hearts, we ask for you to remind us to find ways to celebrate the Joy. Help us to be a joy to others. In Christ we pray. Amen.

Saturday, December 22

Lorraine Schneider

I have always been surrounded by family; my parents, brothers, their families, and two bachelor uncles, who always made their home with us. When Norman and I married, I became part of his family; parents, brother, sisters, their families, and many uncles, aunts and cousins. Christmas Eves and Christmas Days were so special with two loving families.

Norman and I were married ten and a half years before our son, Stephen, was born. Sadly, while he was still a young boy, both sets of grandparents and our uncles and aunts were gone. With their passing, the large family Christmases ended. While I have fond memories of them, I have just as fondly remembered Christmases that Norm, Steve and I shared.

I remember how our faces glowed as we lit each other's candle in our darkened church on Christmas Eve. We would read the Christmas story, singing "Silent Night". How the owner called out "Merry Christmas" as we entered his Chinese restaurant after our services. How he smiled as he served our food and joked, calling the fortune cookies, Christmas cookies. The Christmas Days opening the gifts we so carefully selected for each other; our delight that our dog, Andy, always loved getting gifts. How excited he was watching his toys being unwrapped and how he ran through the house with them!

Christmas dinner at our table set with the lovely china Norm's mom left us, looking across the room at my mother's Hummel Nativity figurines. And how Steve and Norm loved the Spritz cookies made just as my mother had.

While I will always treasure our large families, I have come to see that families are not defined by numbers. They are defined by their love, their caring; and by the precious memories they make together. I have come to understand that a family can be just three.

God, thank you for family. Help us to never forget that each member is your gift to us. Amen.

Sunday, December 23

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Barbara Martin

Unconditional Love

My father was one of nine children. All nine children and their families gathered in Lakeland at my grandmother's for Christmas most years. There was a festive atmosphere with everyone together: gifts, laughter, joy, and lots of food. We were a big noisy group with in-laws and cousins. At Christmas dinner, we younger cousins sat at the children's table. There were no TVs or cell phones. We could hear the adults talking about a multitude of political, social, and religious issues including civil rights and the Cuban missile crisis. While I didn't understand all of it, I knew there were disagreements and heated arguments. This was not a group of one mind about anything!

These differences, however, never mattered when someone in the family had needs.

There were illnesses, deaths, and problems with children, careers and finances. The "others" always stepped up to the plate to comfort, soothe, and support. As the years continued, more tables were added for cousins who married and had families. This included a Yankee (gasp!), a Jew, and an internationally adopted baby. The disagreements and arguments continued, yet the same spirit of acceptance and love always prevailed.

I learned later that there was more discord than I recognized. But what I also learned from this messy family cacophony was God's message: "And now abideth faith, hope and love, these three; but the greatest of these is *love*."

Remembering that message regarding the diverse "family of man" is the healing option for all of us. Pay-it-forward everyday with small actions of love: a smile can lift spirits, a kind word can be a balm for someone's soul, or a small gesture may bring peace.

Dear God, keep me ever mindful of your unconditional love for us. Help me find ways to show your love to others on my daily walks through life. Amen.

Monday, December 24

Howard Kurtz

It's not Christmas Eve without Pizza and Green Peppers

Every year I decorate for the holidays, unpacking ornaments, a hand-made wreath, and other items from Christmas past. The month of December is a constant reminder that my parents are no longer here to celebrate with me.

Growing up in Pennsylvania, we always had pizza after coming home from church on Christmas Eve. We would sit around the tree and open one gift and have pizza. Mother always insisted that the red sauce and white cheese pizza must have green peppers, so that it was decorated for the holidays. That was my family's tradition.

Every year I returned home to spend Christmas Eve with my parents and in later years with only my mom, when my father passed away. Mother's last Christmas Eve was spent in a nursing home. My husband, Howard and I went to visit her after church, when most of the residents were asleep. We wheeled her down the hallway to a room where they had a Christmas tree and we opened our presents, listening to a portable radio softly playing Christmas carols. Mother eyes filled with delight when she saw that we had also brought the pizza - as we opened the still warm box, she smiled and said, "You remembered - It's not Christmas Eve without pizza and green peppers."

After the Christmas Eve service, Howard and I keep the memories of my youth alive as we return to our new home in Florida. We have pizza with green peppers, our holiday tradition.

Lord, as we will celebrate the Christmas season, let us remember those who have lost dear friends and family. God, here and now, as real and present as you were those many years ago in Bethlehem, bring us great joy, as we create new and wonderful memories. Amen.

Tuesday, December 25

Jane Callahan

During the season of Advent, we celebrate Christ's coming into the world. As we clear the Thanksgiving dishes and turn our thoughts toward Advent, we begin to play "For Unto Us a Child is Born" from Handel's Messiah, at our house and in our car. For me, this song is an emotional and uplifting Christmas message.

"For unto us a child is born!" the song joyously proclaims. God sent Jesus to us, to the world! The song starts right off with Christmas.

Singing, **"unto us a Son is given!"** is a celebration of advent; the child is God's son, a gift to us.

The prophesy from Isaiah 6:9 is fulfilled in the Christ child.

The song next announces **"and the government shall be upon His shoulder,"** an assurance that the Messiah has power!

In my favorite versions of this song, the beautiful orchestra and choir give majesty to the coming of the Christ child. The powerful words with the stirring music paint a picture of the Christ, declaring, **"And his name shall be called—"**

"Wonderful Counselor" -- we can trust the Christ to listen to us and guide us

"The Mighty God" – the Christ's power is divine

"The Everlasting Father" – the Christ will provide parental love and care

"The Prince of Peace" – Christ the King will bring peace!

Hearing these majestic and powerful words and music brings me straight into Advent. In the midst of the preparations for Christmas, playing this song from Handel's oratorio focuses us on Advent—celebrating Christ's coming into the world.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the Christ child, the wonderful counselor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the prince of peace—born as a gift for us at Christmas. Amen.

Mary Did Know?

Mary did you know that your baby boy would one day walk on water?
Mary did you know that your baby boy would save our sons and daughters?
Did you know that your baby boy has come to make you new?
This child that you've delivered, will soon deliver you

Mary did you know that your baby boy will give sight to a blind man?
Mary did you know that your baby boy will calm a storm with his hand?
Did you know that your baby boy has walked where angels trod?
When you kiss your little baby, you kiss the face of God

Mary did you know? Mary did you know? Mary did you know?

Mary did you know? Mary did you know? Mary did you know?

The blind will see, the deaf will hear, the dead will live again
The lame will leap, the dumb will speak, the praises of the lamb

Mary did you know that your baby boy is Lord of all creation?
Mary did you know that your baby boy would one day rule the nations?
Did you know that your baby boy is heaven's perfect lamb?
That sleeping child you're holding is the great I am.

Songwriters: Buddy Greene / Mark Lowry
Mary, Did You Know?
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