



*First Presbyterian Church
of Fenton*

Cover page art created by Peggy Allen

Table of Contents

Click a specific date/name to navigate to that page.

Introduction	Rev. Larry McMellen	1
November 30	Rev. James Foster.....	2
December 1	Donna Anderson.....	3
December 2	Patti Nelson	4
December 3	Nancy Parkin	5
December 4	Janet Stork.....	6
December 5	Cathy Hollopeter	7
December 6	Bev Welch.....	8
December 7	Rev. Max Hayden.....	9
December 8	Jan Foster.....	10
December 9	Jenny Gibb.....	11
December 10	Lynne Watters	12
December 11	Gloria Butts	13
December 12	Jan Jacobs	14
December 13	Roy Fetzer	15
December 14	Rev. David Eshleman	16
December 15	Jonathan Wenzel.....	17
December 17	Peggy Fowler.....	19
December 18	Robert Strom	20
December 19	Lorraine Eshleman	21
December 20	Vanessa Skaff	22
December 21	Rev. Lloyd Hall	23
December 22	Diane Marsom	24
December 23	Sue Lantz.....	25
December 24	Sheila Tabone	26
Credits for artwork.....		27

This Advent Devotional Booklet is as unique as the individuals who have shared their stories! We eagerly anticipate each offering—just like kids before Christmas.

An experience that stuck in someone’s memory can be just what another church member needs as they journey through the Advent discipline!

This approach marks its 17th year here at FFPC. Rhea Adgate suggested the concept, and we have enjoyed the results.

May this edition help you get ready to hear, with renewed depth and meaning and faith, the story of God’s gift of the Christ Child, our salvation!

In the name of the Prince of Peace: May the peace of Christ be with you!

Shalom

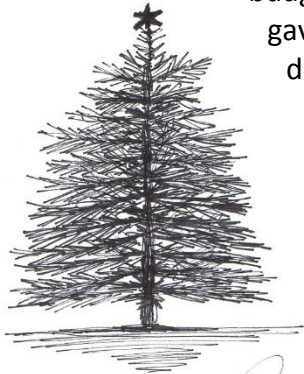


[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Isaiah 1:1-9; 2 Peter 3:1-10; Matthew 25:1-13

Our First Tree

In 1969, Jan and I were newlyweds living in a small upstairs apartment in Holland, Michigan. I was in my second year at Hope College and Jan was in her first year as a teacher. With barely enough for necessities, we had reached the sensible conclusion that a Christmas tree was something our budget could not justify. Yet, as Advent pressed on, our logical resolve gave way to sentimental impulses. We purchased a two-foot tall tree (a dowel rod trunk with branches made from coat hanger wire twisted around green cellophane) for \$2, and a set of lights for another dollar. Given that our weekly grocery budget was \$10, that meant several more dinners of rice and bouillon. Yet, this became one of our most special Christmas purchases ever. It became a small illustration of our faith—in God and each other.



*James
Foster*

This year we have three trees in our home. There is one in the living room and one in the family room. The third is in the window of my study. It's the tree we bought forty-five years ago. The branches are less straight and a bit sparser in greenery. Yet, no matter what other decorations we put up, it always feels like Christmas once the little tree takes its place. Each year, as we look at that tree, God helps us to appreciate the blessings we have now through the memory of the blessings of the past; and this is a reminder of why we can trust in God's Grace.

Advent is a "season of preparation," and our Bible readings invite us to look ahead. Yet, they also do this by reminding us to look back, to remember God's faithfulness throughout past generations. Jan and I think of that every time we see our first tree.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Isaiah 1:10–20; 1 Thessalonians 1:1–10; Luke 20:1–8

2014 has been a year of change for my family. My dad died in April, Kelsy got married in June, and Chris and I moved from our home of 22 years in August. We are both ready for things to slow down. That's my prayer for us, and you, this holiday season. I pray that all of our lives slow down.

Let's try not to get caught up too much in the holiday craziness. Decorate enough to make us happy, but not so much that it's a chore. If our gift list is too long, reach out to some people on it; they may be happy to cut their list down, too. Take time to enjoy the parts of the holidays that we truly enjoy instead of rushing around to try to do everything out of a sense of obligation.

I believe God wants the holidays to be a time of reflection and love. That's why I think He is pleased when we take time to sit by the fire, enjoy a hot cup of coffee with someone we love, listen to Christmas music as we watch the falling snow, play with our children, or run with the dog (or dogs in our case). It's so easy to put the important things off as we rush around to try to do everything else. I am praying for God to help me remember that everything else can wait or not get done at all, and to know that He wants me to do all those little, wonderful things that I really want to do anyway.

Blessings and peace to you this Christmas and beyond.

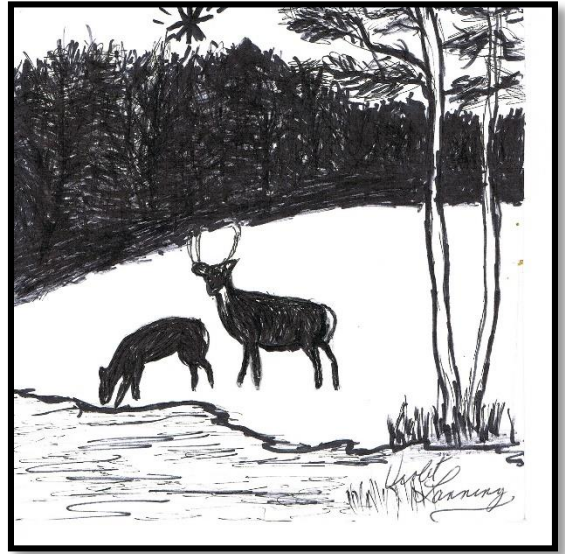


[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Isaiah 1:21-31; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12; Luke 20:9-18

The Isaiah reading for today refers to a once faithful city whose inhabitants had gone bad. They had their priorities all wrong. Once in a while we need a reminder about what is important, and what is not. Advent season is:

- A** A time to prepare
- D** doing what is right, kind & good,
- V** vacating the small stuff,
- E** enjoying and engaging in the important stuff,
- N** nagging others to do the same,
- T** taking time to prioritize.



[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Isaiah 2:1-4; 1 Thessalonians 2:13-20; Luke 20:19-26

A Christmas present—*The Christmas Gift*
Stages-of-Growth Memories

Child—Christmas tree, a Christmas present, Grandpa's house with cousins, good food

Youth—Christmas tree, presents, church, family, good food

Married—Christmas tree, shopping, baking, new friends, presents, many miles from any family that first year

Family—First baby, church, Advent, Christmas tree, shopping, baking, presents, church family, Christmas morning

Two more babies—My Lord Jesus, family, church family, Advent, Christmas tree, Christmas cards, shopping, baking, wrapping, busy, church services, Christmas morning

Growing children—My Lord and Savior Jesus-my friend, Advent, Christmas tree, Christmas cards, shopping, baking, wrapping, family, church family, church services, Christmas morning

Adult children—My Lord and Savior Jesus-my friend, family, grandchildren, church family, Advent, church services, Christmas tree, Christmas cards, shopping, baking, wrapping

Empty nest—My Lord and Savior Jesus-my friend, family, church family, Advent, Christmas tree, Christmas cards, church services, shopping

And for many years now—My Lord and Savior Jesus—my friend—the **Christmas gift** I had all along even when He was not part of my memories, family, church family, Advent, church services, Christmas tree, Christmas cards, and peacefulness!

During this season of Advent, my prayer for all is
that our *Christmas gift* will calm the busy
and give you peace.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Isaiah 2:5-22; 1 Thessalonians 3:1-13; Luke 20:27-40

What is God's plan for our church? When will we get a new pastor? Who will it be? A woman or a man? Young or older? Our future is shrouded in mystery. Faith is our companion. We walk together toward a tomorrow that only God knows. We pray. We sing. We worship. We take care of one another. God, our Father, presents us with great gifts: our families, friends, church, our church family and this wonderful world. We do not know when God will give us our new pastor. But we know that He will provide.

"Ask, and you will receive. Search, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Whoever seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door is opened. Who among you will give your children a stone when they ask for bread? Or give them a snake when they ask for fish? If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him." Matthew 7:7-11

Let us ask our God.

"And I will give you pastors according to Mine heart, who shall feed you with knowledge and understanding." Jeremiah 3:15, 21st Century King James Version

Merry Christmas.



Vera Thorton

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Isaiah 3:1-4:1; 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12; Luke 20:41-21:4

My family and I began our journey with this congregation in 2006 when our daughter, Megan, was just 13 months old. Three years later, we welcomed our second daughter, Emily, into our family, and she was baptized in this church. Since then, it has been a blessing to watch our daughters grow in their faith. From their time in the nursery with Carol to Carpenter's Corner, Lamplights, VBS, and lock-ins, Megan and Emily are becoming the Christians God wants them to be.

During my father's hospice in the spring, Megan and Emily never showed fear or unease around him. He withered away, yet they always gave hugs, watched TV with him, and shared their school pictures and work. They prayed for him and asked questions about heaven I had no answers for, all the while accepting what was bound to happen. They always had a hug for me, their grandma, their aunts, and especially for their grandpa.

On May 28th, while I was watching Emily graduate from preschool and participate in a dance recital in Flint, my father passed away after a long, hard fight against cancer. Through the last five months, my girls have continued to amaze me with their kind words and gestures that seem to come from out of the blue. Recently, Emily drew a picture in her church bulletin of her and her grandpa. She is smiling, he has tears. She explained to me that she is trying to help him feel better.

As we enter this Christmas season, I am reminded of how big the hearts of children are and that we cannot underestimate their ability to care and empathize. And, when times become overbearing this season, I know they will be there at my side and God will be on the other.



Emily Hollopeter

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Isaiah 4:2-6; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Luke 21:5-19

Angels
"Angels We Have Heard on High"

During the holiday season, angels seem to be in as many places as Santa. They are found in our music, our stories, on television, and in our books. Angels are popular as decorations, on top of the tree and as well as on our cards, wrapping paper, sweaters, and in our songs.

The gospel of Luke tells us that an angel came to Mary to tell her of God's plan. An angel visited Joseph to reassure him. Of course, a host of angels were in the sky over the fields of Bethlehem to proclaim the good news to the shepherds.



— We are reminded today, as they were that first Christmas, that angels are there to watch over us and to guide us.

The angels proclaimed: "Noel, Noel. Born is the King of Israel."

May God's angels be with you this Christmas season.



[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Isaiah 5:1-7; 2 Peter 3:11-18; Luke 7:28-35

Advent is a time of expectation and wonder. The anticipation of Christmas and what it will bring into my life is always as exciting as the first time I sat on Santa Claus's lap and tried to remember what I wished for Christmas. Life is filled with expectations, and as we journey in this new season I hope to find some new clarity in Emmanuel, "God is with us."

Who is God? What does God look like? What does God want from us?

The strange prophetic figure John the Baptizer tells us that we are about to discover the answer to these questions. In the life and ministry of Jesus, God came near to us; we were given a full revelation of the truth of God. Jesus not only comes to us, but He comes rearranging our ideas and preconceptions of God.

As we move through this week of the Advent, we are invited to look at God, the world, and the gift of Jesus through the eyes of the prophet John. From out "in the wilderness," John's message is "the beginning of the good news of Jesus the Christ, the Son of God." What is the good news? At its most basic, the good news is that God is finally coming among us. "Prepare the way of the Lord." The only problem is that John makes it clear that the Messiah's identity is other than we expected. Will we be disappointed in or excited about the opportunities Jesus brings to our community?

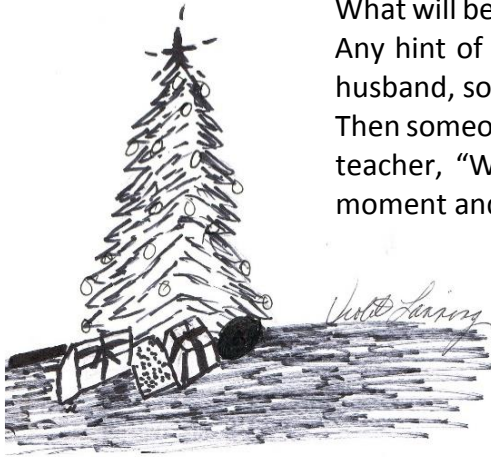
Shalom

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Isaiah 5:8-17; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Luke 21:20-28

What's Your Story?

My sister and I recently spent a day in Frankenmuth. We started as usual, with a few hours at Bronner's Christmas Store. We admired rows of beautiful ornaments and laughed ourselves silly at a few (Yes, "Frosty the Toilet," I mean you.). I was especially enthralled by dozens of beautifully coordinated, themed, decorated Christmas trees and imagined having such stunning creations in our living room window.



What will be in our living room is our old (almost 40 years) artificial tree. Any hint of replacing it is met by shocked dismay on the faces of my husband, son, and daughter. "We've ALWAYS had the tree!" they wail. Then someone tells the story of our son being asked by his kindergarten teacher, "Where do Christmas trees come from?" He thought for a moment and proudly answered, "Boxes in the attic."

On that old tree will go decorations that are not coordinated or themed. Each one does come with a story, however. There are the painted pine cones my German grandmother made and that dumpy clay tree fashioned and painted by pudgy fingers in first grade that says, "Glory to God" in Hebrew. My husband got it when

he finished seminary. And so it goes. Each story of family, friends, and faith has been told and retold to our children, grandchildren, and visitors.

To a casual observer, it is just a scruffy tree crammed with a bunch of mismatched ornaments. To those who hear our stories, however, it is the history of a family and the faith that sustains it; and we gladly share those stories.

We all have stories of faith and family that need to be shared from one generation to the next. As you celebrate this holiday time, share your stories just as the shepherds shared theirs that wonderful first Christmas.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Isaiah 5:18–25; 1 Thessalonians 5:12–28; Luke 21:29–38

Christmas has a feeling. It is hard to describe it. It is not the anticipation, the preparations, or even the events of that day. It is small moments, quiet moments—when sitting with ones that we love. It is in the flickering flame of the fire, in a child’s profile, a warm touch, a feeling of closeness. It is then that I realize that the feeling is the Holy Spirit bringing God and Jesus as one, to all of us.

Thessalonians 5:19 states, “Do not stifle the Holy Spirit.” Although many forces seem to do just that during this time of Advent and Christmas, instead we can choose to “prepare ye the way of the Lord.” Find time during this season to be still, to meditate, to clear your mind, to pray, and feel the Holy Spirit.

What is really real? Some say only love and fear are real. I believe that fear is only a product of our meek minds; and, therefore, only love is real. That truth, that love is the true gift of Jesus at Christmas.



[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Isaiah 6:1–13; 2 Thessalonians 1:1–12; John 7:53–8:11

There are perks to getting older, right? My family came up with the following list: no more homework, having time to slow down and smell the roses, saving money on haircuts, getting senior discounts and getting wiser. Yes, we gain wisdom. We mature in many ways; hopefully, our Christian faith is one of them.

Christmas is the celebration of the birth of Jesus, the foundation of our faith. Some of our earliest memories of Christmas are so warm and wonderful that we have made them into traditions. My favorite childhood Christmas memory is of sitting on the living room floor around the coffee table, lighting candles on a homemade Advent wreath, reading Bible stories, and singing carols. Certainly, as children we focused on the gifts!



In some ways, this hasn't changed. As adults we still enjoy the excitement of buying that perfect gift for someone, or opening a wonderful surprise. We spend countless hours decorating our homes and planning parties. We still feel a sense of awe when we see the story of Jesus' birth acted out by children.

The changes are there, though. They are subtle. We're wiser now; we think about Christmas in a different way. Notice how we treasure the stories more every year? Experiences in our lives have given us empathy. Now we can relate to the concern and uncertainty felt by a young husband worried over his family's safety (Joseph), and we can feel the mixture of joy and anxiety in a young mother about to give birth (Mary).

Now, we feel a bone-deep gratitude for the most extravagant gift ever given, a baby sent to save us. Now there's a perk for you.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Isaiah 7:1-9; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12; Luke 22:1-13

December 11, 2014 is the 48th anniversary of my membership at First Presbyterian Church in Fenton. It is that the Lord has blessed me with an excellent memory. It is also the anniversary of my son's baptism, my cousin's birthday, and the only time my mother was in Michigan. Chris was less than 4 weeks old. Mother wanted to be here for the baptism, but it snowed the week before and she decided to go to California with my brother.

Each year about First Presbyterian's birthday, I receive an invitation to attend the celebration, which I do. However, I do so with a heavy heart for two reasons. First, I come to honor the saints who have practiced their faith for First Presbyterian far more than I. Each year it brings to memory someone that joined the church about 3 weeks after myself. Ill health took them in about the 39th year. This person worked longer and harder. There are many others.

Second, I have a difficult time not remembering the 20 years of membership in Hope Presbyterian Church in Watertown, New York. You can take the girl out of NY, but not NY out of the girl. In this church I received most of my Christian education from a red-haired bearded minister with a beautiful voice. During my teenage years he taught me religion can be fun. This was during WWII when bubble gum was not available. At church camp we got some. Rev. UpDyke and Rabbi Rothman got gum in their beards. I think they had help.

Although, after my teenage years, I did not attend church as much. I moved from NY to Texas, to California, to Michigan, to Florida, and back to Michigan. There was one thing that stayed with me that happened before the 68 years of church membership. It was on a cold winter night (they are all cold in Watertown) when I was a small child with my mother beside me. Faith came to me, but no one else noticed.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Isaiah 7:10–25; 2 Thessalonians 2:13–3:5; Luke 22:14–30

In the spring, I can't take a walk without stopping every few yards to pick fresh sprigs of plants and tiny little flowers. I take them home and press them to use in my craft projects. Then, in the fall, it's the same with the leaves. Each one is a work of art. Even though the beauty of the fall trees sometimes takes my breath away, I'm just as awestruck with the individual leaves.

I used to pick up the "perfect" little red leaf or the tiniest oak leaf. But as I grow older, I find the unusual ones more attractive—the ones with character, the ones with streaks or spots, unusual shapes, or the ones with odd coloration. Before I saw these things as flaws; now I find them beautiful. This gives me hope. All those things in me from the past, that seem to weigh me down, that I see as failures, are actually things I need to go through in order to learn and grow. I'm grateful to have a forgiving God who loves me, in spite of mistakes and failures. I hope He views them as "character."

As Christmas comes and goes, I prepare for a fresh start—to forget the past and move forward to 2015 with renewed energy, peace, and joy.

I wish the same for all of you, my friends.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)



Alice Maletic

Isaiah 8:1-15; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-18; Luke 22:31-38

I enjoy the time leading up to Christmas because I realize how grateful I am for what we have. It gives me an opportunity to show the ones I love how I appreciate them in my life. I am always looking for the right gift that would make them happy. We celebrate the Christmas season, the first coming of Jesus, with family, friends, gifts, food, and music. I am sad to say I have been missing the other reason for Advent.

It was prophesied that our savior would come, that He would live with us and teach us who God really is. Just as it is prophesied that He will come again, I ask myself, "Am I ready?" I can honestly say, "I'm not sure." Every day I look around at what God has made, and I am in awe. I know that Jesus is my Lord and Savior, but when He comes again, am I ready to be judged? The things I know about myself that I do not like, and the ways I need to change along with the things I do not know about myself, scare me.

This year is going to be a little different. Instead of just celebrating the coming of Christmas like years past, this year will include reading, studying, praying, fasting, and meditating to get ready for the coming of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.



Vera Thorton

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Isaiah 13:1-13; Hebrews 12:18-29; John 3:22-30

Jesus—the Man Who was “All About Others”

Jesus lived his life as a wonderful example of one whose life was “all about others”—not about himself. He could easily have played the “I am royalty” card (Phil. 2:1-11). But his calling—as God’s son—was to live his life in gracious helpfulness.

I especially like the Gospel of Luke with its many stories of Jesus’ heart being moved by human need—and how he reached out and did something about each one: restoring suffering ones to wholeness and troubled minds to sanity, forgiving those who could not forgive themselves. Crowds followed Jesus because they sensed HOPE in the midst of poverty and misery and put-downs and the occupation of a foreign power that could be brutal.



The only people who Jesus challenged were the religious leaders whose lives were so much “all about themselves” (while being cloaked in religious disguise) that they had lost touch with reality and the people. In hopeful contrast, Jesus reached out to embrace all of humanity.

In Luke’s gospel, the narratives of Jesus’ birth are very personal—with angel messengers assuring Joseph and Mary that it was okay for Mary to be expecting a baby, a very special baby as a matter of fact. Lowly, scruffy shepherds were the first to arrive and be awestruck before the manger.

There are so many earthy characters in the first two chapters of the Gospel of Luke—look for them yourself! If God could connect with them and through them, God can definitely connect with us and through us this Advent season.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Isaiah 8:16–9:1; 2 Peter 1:1–11; Luke 22:39–53

Time is fleeting, except when there is anticipation of something good to come, then time has a way of lingering around and keeping company for awhile. How we spend our time is important, for it is a gift from God. We can spend it in lofty pursuits, idyllic pleasures, or wonton distractions. While such endeavors may bring short term satisfaction, the appetite for them after indulging is rarely long-sated before demanding our time once again. This century, these distractions have become easier and much more tempting. The tools that aid in our connectedness and communication which make the world seem like a smaller place with danger around the corner, disconnect us from the life around us, the life that enriches us, and sometimes from the love God gives us. Instead of looking forward expectantly and lovingly like a child awaiting Christmas, we move forward in our daily machinations disconnected from God and the miracle of his Son. Let time keep company for a while, let the moments linger. Remember the anticipation of the celebration of the birth of our Lord when you were a child. Reach out for it, grasp it, ignore the artificial distractions, and once again let time seem like it is standing still. Fill that time with anticipation for the coming of our Lord and let your heart fill with love and wonder. Reach out to another and share the joy of the season. It is the human connections, that expression of friendly love and warmth and concern that is a gift, if we spare the time to let it happen. In the time of anticipation, think of the good times to come, the miracle and how to best prepare your heart, mind, and soul to grow your faith and share it with others, to share the miracle that is soon to come.

“His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love.” 2 Peter 1:3-7

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Isaiah 9:2-7; 2 Peter 1:12-21; Luke 22:54-69

My wife is gone. On August 31st, 2014 at approximately 4:30 a.m., her life ceased. Within a few seconds, she went from being surrounded by family and a seemingly endless amount of high tech medical equipment to that which lies beyond the veil from life to death. This is the reality of things which cannot be changed; only partially accommodated, but never fully understood.

Christmas is soon arriving, and I'm thinking how I'll observe the Yuletide season in light of what has happened. What accommodations will I make? What observances will I partake of? What rituals will I continue?

Christmas the measurable seems to have a life of its own. It's as if the lights, the decorations, the tree trimming, the TV specials, even the bad sweaters come of their own volition.

However, it's Christmas the immeasurable that I'm counting on. The extra hugs, the unexpected visits and phone calls, the salutations on the street, and the efforts to make sure that that special person is cared for and not alone.

Yes, my wife is gone. But if any part of her continues in this life, it is hoped to be found in Christmas the immeasurable. Nature abhors a vacuum, and the hole which came with her passing can only be filled by what we choose to take its place. God bless us all.



PEGGY ALLEN

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Isaiah 9:8–17; 2 Peter 2:1–10a; Mark 1:1–8

Un-plug for Advent

Jesus was born into this world to bring us closer to our Creator God. He was given human form and was subject to feeling the same physical sensations and emotions as we are today. I imagine that the time period into which Jesus was born allowed him more time to tune into the Spirit of God because life was, perhaps, more elemental and slightly less complicated. I imagine, still more, that Jesus could slip away to sit on a hill or find some quiet spot to be meditative and listen to the “still, small voice of God.” He did not have all the noisy distractions around him that we have today.

Just take a moment and imagine what it might be like for us in this day and age to be without all the hustle and bustle constantly around us...blaring televisions, constant news feeds, cell phones ringing in our ears, roaring traffic, politicians and advertisers clamoring for our attention and money, and on and on. In today’s lectionary reading from 2 Peter, 2:1-10, the writer talks about how even in ancient times there were deceitful and destructive people trying to make a profit off telling false stories while trying to bring the righteous down. We need to turn these destructive distractions off. In Mark 1:1-8, John the Baptist appears and says to the people, “Turn away from your sins and be baptized.” If he appeared today he would probably be saying to us, “Turn off your electronic devices and listen for God in your souls.”

This Advent season, a time of hopeful expectation, should be one of quiet reflection and tuning into God’s Gift to the world. As a gift to God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, we should devote some time each day to turn off the distractions, sit quietly...mediate, reflect, read and pray...listening for God’s still, small voice.

Pray for peace, be quiet, and prepare for the coming of Jesus.

God bless you this Advent season.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Isaiah 11:1-9; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 3:16-21

On June 23, 2013 I experienced a life-changing event that tested my faith and my fortitude. I checked into the hospital with a very severe pain in my right leg. After the doctors in the emergency room looked over the x-ray of my leg, it was determined that I had developed a major blood clot that ran from my knee down to my ankle and that my leg would have to be amputated from the knee down. Although the news was grim, I remained calm and kept my wits about me. But then there was more bad news. The leg would have to be taken off again, this time above the knee. The most excruciating pain I have ever experienced was when they changed the bandages and the open wound was exposed. It was at this time I asked for the good Lord's help. I have always been a man of faith and believe that my Lord will take care of me no matter how I am tested. A scripture from the Bible reminds me of this chapter in my life quite clearly. Isaiah 11:1-9



[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Isaiah 11:10–16; Revelation 20:1–10; John 5:30–47

Christmas prayers—meditations—for a busy heart:

YOU are waiting for me
when I set aside the decorating,
the tinsel . . . the sweet things . . . the wrapping,
when I stop and look out the window,
when I rest my heart near the shining tree,
or *best*, near the tiny manger,
YOU are waiting . . . there!

O Lord, somehow when the night settles in
and the lights are on the tree,
and I sit in the silence,
I am as rich as anyone in the world!
I forget the bare spots in the carpet
or the tear in the sofa.
I forget that the colors don't match
as well as I might wish.
I forget—I just forget.
And in the soft light of the Christmas tree
with the crèche beneath its boughs,
O, I have treasures—
treasures beyond any wealth!

“A Little Incarnation”
She counted the baby's round, pink toes,
pressed the soft, cushiony soles to her cheeks,
kissed both tiny feet,
blew on the baby's tummy,
giggled as much as the infant
and came away *born again*.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Isaiah 28:9–22; Revelation 20:11–21:8; Luke 1:5–25

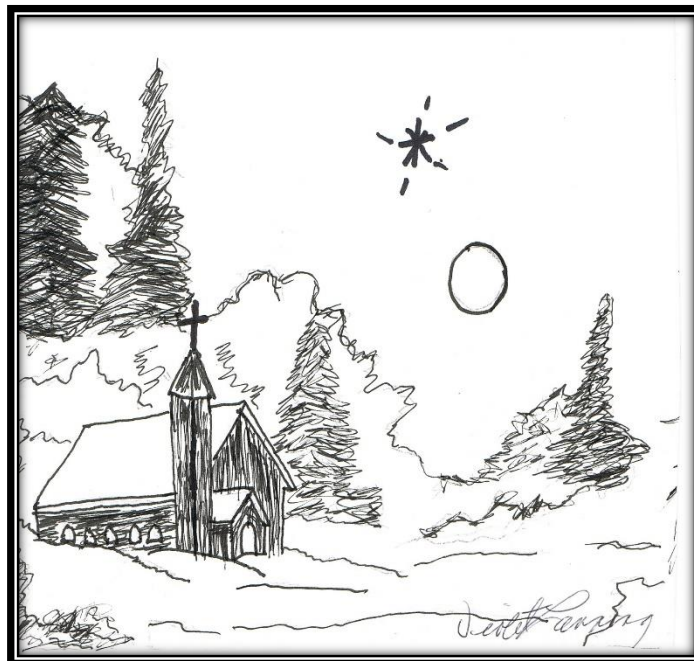
To my family, this reflection is the meaning of Advent, not only during but also throughout our lives.

Life is an Advent Season

"Life is a constant Advent season, we are continually waiting to become, to discover, to complete, to fulfill. Hope, struggle, fear, expectation and fulfillment are all part of our Advent experience.

The world is not as just, not as loving, not as whole as we know it can and should be. But the coming of Christ and his presence among us—as one of us—gives us reason to live in hope: that light will shatter the darkness, that we can be liberated from our fears and prejudices, that we are never alone or abandoned.

May this Advent season be a time for bringing hope, transformation and fulfillment into the Advent of our lives." Connections 11-28-93



[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Isaiah 29:9–24; Revelation 21:9–21; Luke 1:26–38

Luke 1:37–38: “For with God nothing will be impossible.” Then Mary said, “Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.

There are few passages of Scripture that so fully comprehend the faith life as these two verses.

The declaration of God’s unlimited power, especially in contrast to our limitations, expresses a faith conviction that quickly outruns our imagination. How can we imagine what it means to be without any limit at all? Even when we speculate about the power of God, we discover that both our language and our imagining are constrained by what we know, what we have experienced, and what we are certain are physical limitations that cannot be breached. The incarnation—God in Christ—is a reminder. With God, all things are possible.

That said (and accepted), what is to keep us from daring anything that God calls us to do? Our rational minds quickly find the reasons to not do it. Our sensitivity and pride let the world dominate our actions. We do not dare with faith and trust but with rationally disciplined and socially conscious minds.

That’s really the point of the Mary story. The message spoke of a biological impossibility that had (if it were possible) nothing but negative social ramifications. Mary is rightfully honored, not because she happened to be Jesus’ mother, but because 1) she accepted the truth that with God all things are possible and 2) she put everything else aside in order to do God’s will.

As we come nearer to the birth day with its focus on the baby, it is good to remember that it was a combination of divine power and human obedience that got us here.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Isaiah 31:1-9; Revelation 21:22-22:5

Wouldn't it be nice if we did things just because God told us to; no reason required. No argument, no hesitation, just do it because He said so. Just like we said to our kids sometimes when they asked why: "You have to do it because I said so."

This Christmas, offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving. "Give thanks to the Lord; call upon his name, make known his deeds among the peoples." (PS 105:1) The Psalms urge us to give thanks. "Thank the Lord for his steadfast love." (PS 107:8)

Paul tells us to always be thankful and abounding in gratitude. I have a great deal to be thankful and grateful for: my husband, my children, my grandchildren, and being a member of First Presbyterian Church of Fenton where I have learned so much about the God I love. I am grateful for each day I wake up, for each birthday I celebrate, and for each Christmas for which I write another devotion.

What are you thankful and grateful for this Advent season? How about the rain that ruined your picnic but watered your grass and garden so you didn't have to, or the rainbow it left behind? Last winter was one many would like to forget, but because of it, many farmers were helped by the good frost layer left behind. So you see, the things that appear bad to us sometimes really aren't that bad at all.

The attitude of gratitude is a clear command and expectation of God. This is true when we get caught up in our daily lives with all the things gone wrong rather than counting our blessings. Even though I have trouble being grateful when the Detroit Tigers lose yet another playoff game, I remind myself that I am grateful that I am still here to see them play it.

We are told to give glory and gratitude to God. Praise the Lord and be thankful and full of gratitude! And remember, don't take time just to reflect this on days like Thanksgiving and Christmas, but give thanks and be grateful every day of your life.

Have a Merry Christmas.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Isaiah 33:17-22; Revelation 22:6-11, 18-20; Luke 1:57-66

This past year I have found myself presented with a variety of challenges. It's been tough! I have, however, been incredibly blessed beyond measure in ways I could never have imagined. I am thankful!

Rev. David Eshleman and his wife Lorraine began a Tuesday morning class, and several of us are on a journey through a book called *The Good and Beautiful God...Falling in Love with the God Jesus Knows*. We are learning to train ourselves to wake up each day and be focused on all the many things in our lives that are beautiful and wonderful, instead of our problems.

"The Bible is the story of the steadfast love of God that culminates in the incarnation, death and resurrection of God on behalf of a wayward world"...and we should interpret it in the light of Jesus which is Love!

Tomorrow is Christmas Eve. I hope my poem has meaning for you.

A Child is Born

Who is this Child born anew?
Conceived in the womb of life,
The embryo of joy and strife.
Aching to be free...to be.
Whose heart will listen?
Whose gentle hand will dry
The tears that glisten?
A cradle rocks upon the dawn;
It holds a child.
Who is this Child born anew?
The Child is LOVE.
The fruit for me and you.



Peggy Jowler

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Isaiah 35:1–10; Revelation 22:12–17, 21; Luke 1:67–80

When my daughters were 4 and 5, the “must have” Christmas gifts were a sled, plastic toboggan, and snow-saucer for cruising down the hill. There were other wants, of course, but those vehicles of snow transport were their heart’s desire.

In the gray, misty pre-dawn of Christmas morning, the girls stood in front of the tree, eagerly scanning the cornucopia of brightly wrapped and unwrapped (Santa’s) gifts. As I turned on tree lights, they explored, searching desperately; but alas, no sleds, no toboggans, nor snow-saucers to be found.

Meanwhile, my dad stood quietly off to the side watching. Melissa and Sarah were trying hard not to look too disappointed, tears welling up despite their best efforts. My dad had a plan, and my fiancée and I watched as he covertly dialed the very special phone number. Earlier that week a phone repairman had serviced our phone and used that number, in the pre-digital/cell era, to test and ring our telephone. At that moment, dad had his brilliant idea for making Christmas morning more exciting and meaningful. He explained he needed the number for his granddaughters’ surprise and wheedled the information from the repairmen.

The phone rang. My dad answered it quickly and in a loud exaggerated voice said, “SANTA CLAUS! It’s Santa Claus! Sure I’ll tell them there are more presents on the porch!” The wonder in their faces when they heard it was Santa Claus on the phone! Santa cared enough to make sure to call to let us know where the much-desired gifts had been placed!

My earthly father, like our heavenly father, loved us so much he not only provided that which was so wished for, but he did it in a way that made it much more memorable and special.



[Back to Table of Contents](#)



Vera Thornton

The artwork in this booklet was created by
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[Back to Table of Contents](#)



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