

ADVENT
2016

*First Presbyterian Church
of Fenton*

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In a season often marked by frenzied busyness, Advent is an opportunity to set aside time to prepare our hearts for Christmas. The selections in this devotional book are designed to help us place our focus on a far greater story than our own—the story of God's redeeming love for the world.

No matter what the department stores try to tell you, Christmas has not yet arrived. There is value as well as excitement in patient and expectant waiting. The Advent season is the four weeks before Christmas that are set aside as a time of expectant waiting and preparation for the celebration of Jesus' birth. But Advent is not just an extension of Christmas; it is a season that links the past, present, and future. Advent offers us the opportunity to share in the ancient longing for the coming of the Messiah, to celebrate His birth, and to be alert for His second coming.

As we light an additional candle on the Advent wreath each Sunday, we get closer to the arrival of the true Light of the world. May this be a season of wonder for you as you discover the gifts Jesus brings at Christmas: hope, love, joy and peace.

"I bring you good news that will cause great joy." Luke 2:10

"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given." Isaiah 9:6

SHARING HOPE

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." Romans 15:13 (NIV)

Picture a homeless man lying huddled in a sleeping bag, propped up against the brick wall in a busy downtown area. It's a heartbreaking image. But now picture that the window of the store he leans against is painted with bright colors, depicting a warm fire in a cozy home. The words "Home for the Holidays" are scripted across the window. Suddenly the heartbreaking scene becomes even more stark as we see with clarity how truly far this man is from home.

A similar contrast exists for many of us this season. The displays of happiness and cheer that are meant to warm our hearts can serve to make us feel more alone and hopeless as we compare our reality to the idealism of the season. The reality is that there is a stark contrast between what the season represents and what many people around us are living. For some it is a season of loneliness, grief, and pain. But just as Jesus entered a dark and hurting world, offering hope in a bigger story, we can do the same. Be the difference for someone this season. Share hope with the world around you—not in an artificial way but by showing genuine care and service to others. This sharing of hope can make our waiting during this season an active waiting. And it can help prepare our hearts to welcome the reason for our hope.

Not feeling like you have hope to share? Rest in the promise of Romans 15:13 that it's not up to you—peace, joy, and hope all come from God, who fills us to overflowing by the power of the Holy Spirit. Look for ways to share hope with others this season—not to create an illusion that everything is picture perfect but simply because God has sent His Son and the world is being transformed because of the work He has done.

Think of someone you know who could use hope this season. What is one practical way you can share hope with that person this week?

THE CHRISMON CHRISTMAS TREE

When did the Chrismon tree begin? And why? What is the reason for it? Where did the idea originate?

Chrismon (Kriz'-mon) is a combination of parts of two words: CHRIST and Monogram. A Chrismon is just that—a monogram of Christ.

Chrismons proclaim our Lord Jesus Christ through the use of symbols. Some of these visible signs for the invisible antedate the Lord's historical life. Others were used by Christ, Himself, and his contemporaries to describe His nature and mission. Over the years, still other symbols for the Savior have been developed by His followers.



They were designed and carved or drawn by some of the earliest Christians. The monograms were found in many places—some on jewelry and utensils, others on doors or in catacombs or in buildings. Early Christians used them to identify themselves to one another, to designate meeting places of the Church, and sometimes to show unbelievers where they stood. Ever more important,

these symbols of the early church served to transmit the faith and beliefs of the artist-teacher to the viewer. Thus, the inspiration was shared and passed on. All Chrismons are made in either white or gold or a combination of the two colors. White, the liturgical color for Christmas, refers to our Lord's purity and perfection; gold refers to His majesty and glory.



The evergreen tree, which symbolizes the eternal life which our Savior has won for us, is a background for tiny white lights and white and gold Chrismons. The lights speak of Him, who is the light of the world, and the Chrismons proclaim the name, the life, and the saving acts of Jesus the Christ.

One of my favorite songs from the church of my childhood is *Jesus Loves Me*. That's a powerful message for children, but it's also a powerful message for us. Let's remind ourselves and others during this Christmas season that Jesus loves us. He doesn't care if our house is perfectly decorated or our gifts perfectly wrapped, or even if we have gifts; he loves us just the way we are, and we are enough. This holiday season when you start to get stressed, remind yourself "Jesus loves me just the way I am."



Annabeth Carnes

I pray you find it. And when things go wrong or get chaotic, remember to tell yourself, "Jesus loves me just the way I am."

I wish everyone in my FFPC family a wonderful and peaceful Christmas.

My goal each holiday season is to find ways to de-stress so I can better enjoy this magical time of year. One great idea I ran across is to focus on what matters. That is, think about the three holiday traditions I love most, pencil those three things in my calendar, and let go of the rest.

Another idea is to bundle up and get outside for a walk once a day. My golden retrievers will appreciate this, and I can sometimes feel the stress diminishing as I walk. It's a good time to pray, too, and the dogs don't mind.

Whatever it is that you need to do to slow your world down a bit so you can better enjoy this beautiful time of year (listen to music, play in the snow, get a daily hug),

Wednesday, November 30

Karyn and Don Kutchev and Rick Stanfill

Psalm 124; Isaiah 54:1-10; Matthew 24:23-35

Being in church with Rick is an experience. He is as spiritual as they come, especially with his extra chromosome. Though he cannot read, Rick watches carefully to make sure he is on the right page of the bulletin and on the right number in the hymnal. He wants to have his Bible open during the readings, because he senses that the Bible contains meaningful messages from God. When the congregation reads or sings, Rick is always just a little behind everyone because he is using social cues instead of reading the words. When we pray, he prays, hands clasped and head bowed.

During the holidays, Rick is giddy with anticipation. He enjoys seeing the Christmas lights, decorating the tree, and planning what presents he wants to give (and receive!). Being in church at Christmas time with Rick is especially meaningful. During this time of year, he often knows the words of the carols he cannot read and is able to joyfully sing out with the rest of the congregation. As his family, this makes us happy to see him embrace the comfort and traditions of Christmas along with everyone else.

At our family gatherings, Rick will often say grace. He is always careful to mention each family member by name, dogs included, even if the family member is not present. He thanks God for our food and for us being “all together.” At Christmas, what we all find especially poignant is that Rick will include the baby Jesus in his prayer. Rick gets it...and reminds us of what is important at Christmas, and throughout the year.

Christmas Blessings to all.



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PICKLED HERRING AND SOUR CREAM

You've maybe said or heard, "It isn't Christmas until..." or, "It doesn't seem like Christmas without..." For example, my sister and I always chow down on pickled herring in sour cream on Christmas Eve—a reminder of childhood. For others it can be more serious. Celebrating the holiday can seem almost impossible for those dealing with crushing loss and grief, whether it comes from a physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual cause.



Christmas is so much more than our beloved traditions, customs, music, food, family, religious services, or even our emotional state. It is a time to set aside our daily routine and wonder again at how our all-powerful God who created the world by His Word alone became a vulnerable helpless infant. The King of Heaven had to nurse, have his diapers changed, and be carried to safety. And He did it in order to demonstrate yet again the overwhelming love He has for us.

As the *Whos down in Whoville (How the Grinch Stole Christmas)* learned, the holiday comes with or without all the trimmings and trappings. It comes whether we welcome or reject it. It comes to remind us again that we are loved beyond human understanding.

May that love fill our Christmas celebration with joy and peace. And may we share that joy and peace with everyone we come in contact with this Christmas.

Merry Christmas!

GETTING CLOSER

One pre-Christmas ritual on our family farm in upstate New York (in the early 1950s) was the arrival of our Christmas tree. My father would leave it in a snow bank by the kitchen porch to *season* for a couple of days before bringing it inside. My first impression was always the same: the tree seemed so small, dwarfed by the house and surrounding landscape. Yet, a strange phenomenon always occurred next. When Dad brought it inside it was an effort to squeeze it through the door; and once set up in the living room it dominated the space. Somehow it went from *so small* to *so big*, and as our family decorated the tree it became the focal point for our home. One simple explanation for this event was the shift in perspective from the great outdoors to the intimate indoors. Something similar happens between Advent and Christmas.



From the outside, December 25th might at first appear *small and far away* when viewed from the distance of one of 364 other days and several months. One of the privileges of the Season of Advent is the opportunity for us to not just wait for Christmas to get closer, but to move closer ourselves. Advent invites us to adjust our focus from the lesser distractions invading our lives; as we draw closer, we have the opportunity to see again what makes Christmas special and personal to us.

Just as the family Christmas tree always *got bigger* once inside, Faith reminds us that the fulfillment of God's promises is always greater than our expectations. So, as we prepare for Christmas to fully come *indoors*, for Jesus to be *God with us*, may our expectations continue to be exceeded by the Lord's Grace.

Christmas is such a special celebration...a celebration of the birth of Jesus. Through the years I have many memories of Christmas.

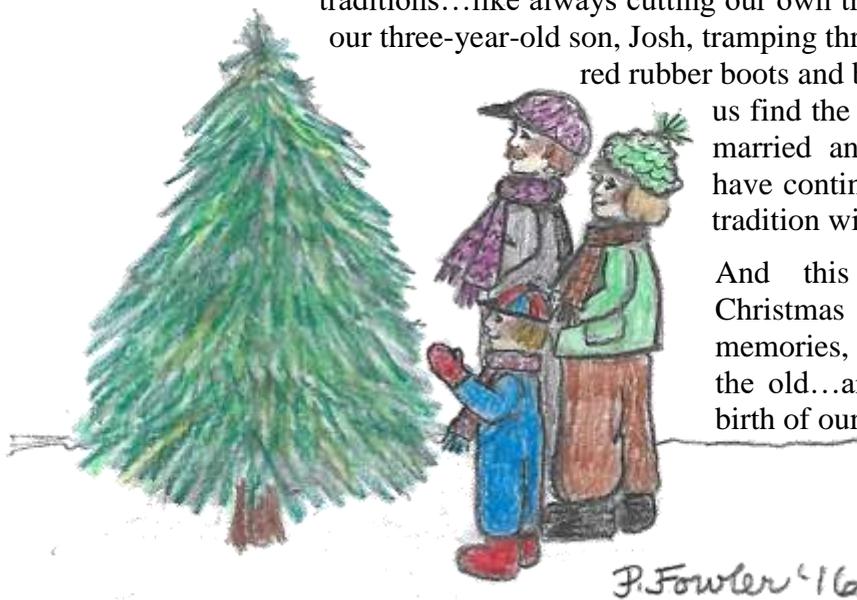
Often my family would attend the Christmas service at church. When I was young I would be a “wiggler” in church and couldn’t wait to get home on Christmas Eve and go to bed. That would make Christmas morning come faster.

One year I wanted to hide behind the couch to see Santa. I was so eager to see him with his bag of presents. We didn’t have a chimney, but I knew he’d come—he always did. I couldn’t convince my parents to let me do this...I tried.

Christmas was a time for baking cookies. As a teenager, I remember decorating the sugar cookies one year by “painting” them with frosting. It took a lot of time, but I enjoyed doing that. I told my two older brothers that they couldn’t eat some of the especially pretty cookies until later, because they looked so nice.

After Max and I married, Christmas included new traditions...like always cutting our own tree. I can still picture our three-year-old son, Josh, tramping through the snow in his red rubber boots and blue snowsuit to help us find the perfect tree. As Josh married and had a family we have continued this tree-cutting tradition with them.

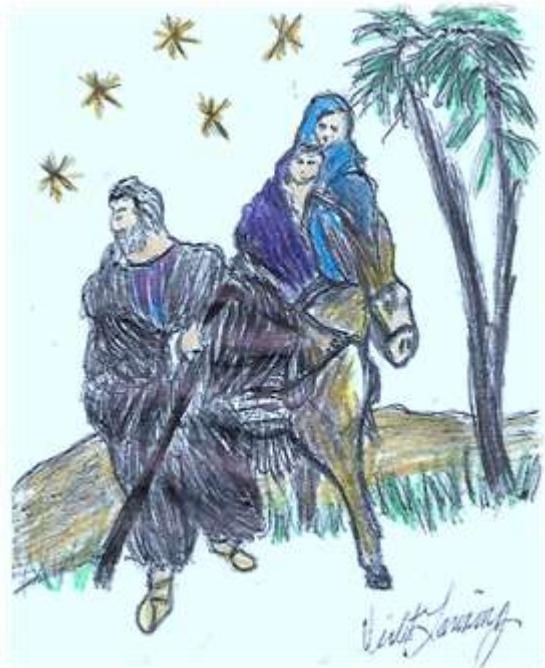
And this will be another Christmas of making new memories, always remembering the old...and remembering the birth of our dear Lord Jesus.



Today is our daughter's birthday. Forty-seven years ago we were rushing to get ready for Christmas because she was due close to the holidays. The journey we were about to take was a bit bumpy but not as bumpy as Mary and Joseph's journey from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem. We drove (our car, not a donkey) across Detroit to the hospital when my labor stopped. The trip took about 45 minutes, not five days. We turned around and went back home. A while later we headed back to the hospital where there was a room for us—unlike the inn. I can't imagine what Mary had to go through without a doctor and nurses in a barn, no less.

Well, Kim was born but our Advent celebration didn't go as expected. Within a week, Kim was back in the hospital. She was very small and not eating well. John and I were both in tears all the way to the hospital. After about ten days, Kim was back home. We had our child for Christmas which was wonderful, but not as precious as God's gift that first Christmas. God certainly had been watching over us just as He had watched over Mary, Joseph, and their new baby.

Christmas that year and every year is joyful and full of hope as God has promised with the birth of His Son. "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."
(Matthew 15:13 BRSV)



A PRAYER AT CHRISTMAS 2016

Father, thank you for your son Jesus, the miracles of life, family and friends, and opportunities to grow and create. Thank you for being with us, no matter what paths we choose or decisions we make. Help us to see each other as brother or sister of Jesus, different in many ways but with the same grace you offer us all. Remind us when we stray.

Awaken in us the desire to mend the breach that often occurs when we disagree. Grant us patience and the ability to understand our differences and the willingness to compromise where there is no alternative but chaos.

Let us never be so caught up with acquiring things that we forget your admonition to share, ensuring that all our children have the means to live and prosper. We pray for the world's people, especially the young. Help us to achieve peace for us all.

Thank you for always listening when we pray, and for the Holy Spirit who touches our lives with home and joy.

Amen

God
With
Us
Now and Always

Tuesday, December 6

Martin-Fanone Family

Psalm 21; Isaiah 41:14-20; Romans 15:14-21

In our 13 married years, we have only once woken up in our own house on Christmas morning. Family is a central part of our lives, and my family is quite far flung. Christmas is one of the few times that I get to see all of my sisters together. So, for my family Christmas is a traveling holiday. I listen to friends tell stories of watching their children wake up and come to see presents that appeared under their tree overnight, and I wonder if we are missing something by not staying in our own beds on Christmas Eve. Then I think about waking up away from my sisters and my nieces and nephews. As children, my sisters and I would all sleep in the same bed on Christmas Eve. That way no one of us could wake up first; we all woke up together and went out to greet Christmas morning as a group. Our families have grown now, and we can't all fit in the same bedroom anymore, but we are together and it is wonderful. Someday, maybe we will stay home for Christmas; we won't pack up all the gifts and the food and the pets and the kids. We'll wake up in our house and grow new traditions in our home. Until then, we will make a home wherever we can be with our family.



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My parents did not attend church every Sunday. Usually my mother attended and she did bring my sister and me. She did read the Bible. I was in the church youth group, sang in the children's choir (cherub choir), and always attended vacation Bible school.

In our household, Christmas was about family and friends. We did not always attend church on Christmas Eve. I don't remember any special Christmas gift. I do remember stuffing dates with peanut

butter and walnuts, and delivering them to neighbors. Christmas day dinner included aunts and uncles from both sides of the family. Then there were visits to friends to exchange homemade cookies and stuffed dates. I still can feel the warmth of the homes and the smell of baked goods and stuffed dates.

When I was very young, I can remember returning home on a very cold night from one of these Christmas visits. My dad wrapped me in a wool blanket and carried me from the car to our house. How warm and protected I felt in his arms.

While my parents were not active in our local church, I did understand their love of God by their devotion to their children, friends, and relatives. We celebrated our community. God protects us as my dad protected me from the cold. God loves us as I was loved by parents and family.

Bless everyone during this joyous season.

“Life is like a bowl of cherries,” right? Well, sorta. There are all kinds of cherries in that bowl—dark ones and light ones, sweet ones and kinda sour.

At Christmas we look around and either realize the diversity in our lives...or not. Think of the wise men who traveled so far.

Not only are we tied to our family by genetics, but we are also tied to people by love alone. Oh my gosh, what would we do without any one of them—the ornery, snippy Uncle Joe or the oh-so critical but smiley church friend. Could we just walk away and create a new life? We could—and we would miss so much growth for ourselves and growth for them.

Jesus loves us so much, with all our warts and foibles. Sometimes I’m just not a nice person. Why, oh why does He love me, too?

Look at the beautiful people, things, songs, good will, and special memories of the season. More and more we see evidence of the scruffy, more poor, unpleasant people and families who are made joyful by another’s good will. Maybe we can make our family larger.

Jesus loves us all.

Pass it on,

and Merry Christmas.



As we go through the seasons of our life (spring, summer, fall, and winter), we often reflect on our past—the people we know, the events we attended, the love, the hope, and the moments that took our breath away, happy and sad. And, if you can relate to this, the bits of knowledge, insight, or advice from someone that you listened to are often important but you were not quite ready to “hear.”

We may not understand those tidbits of insight when we hear them, but comprehension will come. Being in the fall season of my life, there are many thoughts I reflect on that I can now “hear.” Like when my grandpa said, “Enjoy each day because you might not be around tomorrow.” or “Never give up trying.” or “You are as young as you feel.” In my spring season, these insights from my loved ones didn’t seem so important, but in my fall season they definitely are.

The holidays are also a season, a season that can be very happy for many; but it can also be sad for just as many. So remember, if you are happy, provide hope and lift someone up. If you are sad, remember even in your despair there is someone you can help, and think of hope.

“But those that hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and will not faint.”
Isaiah 40:31 NIV

Reflect on your past, live in today, and
have hope in your future.

Blessings to all of us,
whatever season we are in ☺.



Reflect
Past,
Live Today,
Hope Future

The star still shines
And an angel sings
Of the love, peace, and joy
That Christmas brings

At Christmas we remember the simple beauty of the manger in Bethlehem. We see the angels in the sky and the shepherds in their fields. All around us are the stars in the heavens, carols being sung, and candles in the windows. The beauty of the season surrounds us. Peace and love abide in us and all around us.

Did Mary and Joseph feel this peace and beauty amongst the chaos of the birth of their son? I'm sure God was with them. After Jesus was born, I'm sure Mary looked at her first born and felt love. Joseph probably looked at the baby with wonder—the wonder of each new father. “Will I be able to provide the care this new one needs?” They both knew this was God’s son. What an added peace that must have been.

The angels surrounded them and they had to feel the joy. The shepherds came and bowed before Him. The stars shone all around, especially one bright star above the stable.

The beauty of the season surrounded them. May you experience beauty, peace, joy, and love this Christmas.

The Star Still Shines



A SPECIAL MEMORY AT CHRISTMAS...2016

This year was especially difficult for our family as we lost a long-time friend, and a year ago his wife. Memories are always there to make the grief fresh again, but the Christmas season will help us heal. This couple had a strong Italian heritage, so holidays were shared with many and their home was open to all friends. It was not necessary to be Italian!

As I look back over many years I smile and recall special times: trips of adventure when our children were young, Big Wheels on the city sidewalks, snowmobiles in the winter snow, sledding down the hills in Milford, Bocce Ball tournaments, and many golf trips with Michigan friends. Our Italian friends would make fried zeppolis, grilled chicken, and Italian sausage for various events. The wife would bake delicious chocolate chip cookie bars, and bring them for every party we had with our families. They both were very generous to all and attended events when invited.

Although this will be a difficult Christmas season considering the loss, I reflect back many years and feel honored by this friendship. Many others in our church will probably have similar thoughts this December if they have lost a loved one. The many memories we hold dear to our heart will allow us to erase the grief. The blessings of this Christmas and the birth of Christ will bring joy to our broken hearts and lift our spirits.

“Loving Father, help us remember the birth of Jesus, that we may share in the song of the angels, and the gladness of the shepherds and the wisdom of the wise men.”
(a phrase from a prayer by Robert Louis Stevenson)

Merry Christmas



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HOW MY FAITH HELPS ME

As humans we must endure the storms of life. Some of the winds that blow around us include relationship problems, like arguments, hurt feelings, heavy responsibilities and trying to find time for others and ourselves. We have stress from our work and time constraints from fitting in family and home. There is never enough money. If you think that there is, then something fails requiring an influx of cash. Life's biggest stressors involve illness and death.

Psalm 42:5 Why, my soul, are you downcast?
 Why so disturbed within me?
 Put your hope in God,
 for I will yet praise him,
 my Savior and my God.

Some people seem like tumbleweeds blowing where the wind takes them. One coworker of mine used to tell about her life's trials to friends at work. With every telling of her tale, she became more distraught. Then there are the folks that turn to alcohol or drugs to mask their pain.

God is my rock. He is where I turn when I am down. You, my church family, are also there to cheer me. God's believers meet together. I endeavor to enjoy what I have, to count my blessings, to celebrate the lives of my friends and family who have died, and to pray when I am in pain.

May God bless you in this season of blessings. Thank you for being a blessing to me.

Psalm 42:7 Deep calls to deep
 in the roar of your waterfalls;
 all your waves and breakers
 have swept over me.

Psalm 42:8 By day the LORD directs his love,
 at night his song is with me—
 a prayer to the God of my life.

Peace

ADVENT: A COMING OR ARRIVAL

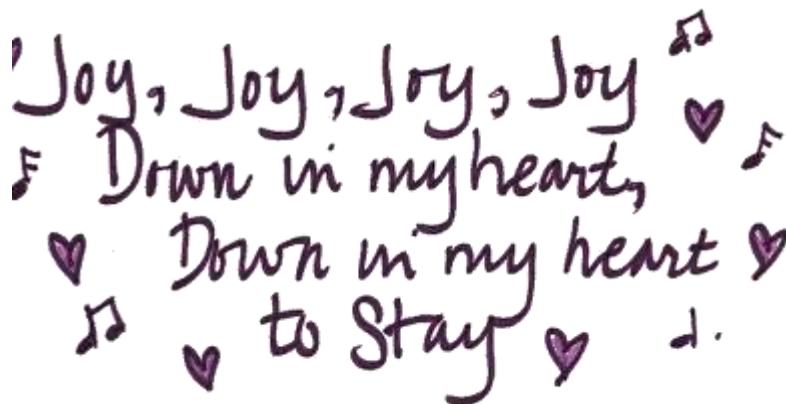
To further heighten the sense of anticipation of Christ's coming, the church named the candles in the wreath. We have lit Hope and Peace and now we are in the week of Joy.

Joy is also the second listed fruit of the spirit. One source said Joy is mentioned in the bible 214 times, depending on translations.

What is joy? Unlike happiness, joy is gladness that is completely independent of the good or bad things that happen in the course of the day, week, year, in your life. In fact, joy denotes supernatural gladness given by God's Spirit that actually seems to show up best during hard times!

Those are not my words but they best describe how I feel. Joy is what we have "down in our heart" as the song goes. Joy to me is that awareness of God's grace, of the relationship I have with Jesus. It is the absolute, no matter what, feeling of peace I feel in the best of times and in the worst of times.

God's got me and I have joy! May you be filled with joy during this season of Advent and forever.



Joy, Joy, Joy, Joy
Down in my heart,
Down in my heart
to Stay

"...And while they were there, the time came for her delivery, and she gave birth to her Son, her Firstborn; and she wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room or place for them in the inn..." - Luke 2: 6-7 (AMP)

“And Jesus was born!

Jesus the king of kings and Lord of Lords was not born in a mansion, nor was He born to wealthy parents. He was born of lowly means in a stable because there was no room for Him in the inn. He didn't come here to be treated as a king, or someone of noble standing. He didn't come here to live in a mansion, or live a life of ease. He came to save the lost - which is all mankind.

So let us celebrate the Lord and thank Him for the sacrifice He made in leaving His throne in glory, to come as an ordinary person like you and me, and then giving up His life for us.

Jesus was born on Christmas day,
and for this very reason, we celebrate.”

© By M.S. Lowndes



Advent is a season of expectant waiting and preparation for the celebration of the birth of Jesus.

The word “advent” is derived from the Latin *advenire* meaning to arrive (from *ad* - venire to come). While it is easy to get caught up in the hustle and bustle of seasonal preparations, it is much more difficult to set aside time for the wonderment of expectant waiting. We know the story...but Advent provides an opportunity to ponder what it may have been like all those years ago. What can we expect from a tiny baby? How can a baby make any difference in the world? How can we prepare? Will we be ready?

I recall that a year ago, our church was observing an advent of a different kind. We had been without a called pastor for almost two years. We were expectantly, if not impatiently, waiting for our Pastor Nominating Committee to find a candidate. We wondered: What can we expect from a new pastor? How can the new pastor make a difference in the life of our church? How can we prepare? Will we be ready?

Interestingly, another word with the same origin as “advent” (*advenire*) is “adventure.” How appropriate that after a time of waiting that we embark on an adventure.



Our church has welcomed co-pastors Robbie and Lindsey Carnes and their delightful children into our church family. We are thankful for their leadership and excited about our future together.

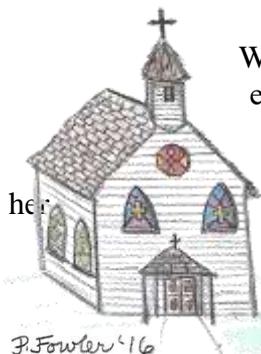
Our world welcomed a baby all those years ago who would change everything! The adventure that started with the birth in a stable continues to inspire and excite us today.

This Advent, take time to ponder and wonder about what lies ahead. Let’s look forward to sharing the excitement of the adventure that awaits us!!

Family

Advent is one of the most special times of the year. It leads up to Christmas, a very important and happy day—the day that our lord and savior was born and our sins forgiven. And I think there are many things that we should do during Advent. But sometimes, we forget who we spend this wonderful time with. Friends and family are the ones who spend Advent with us. They laugh with us, play with us, and just be there with us throughout the days leading up to Christmas. They are one of the best parts of Advent. We praise the lord with them and become more fond of each other.

Every year, my family (including my brother, sister, grandma, grandpa, aunt, mom, and dad), gather together in front of our fireplace and Christmas tree. There, we talk and spend time with each other. Then, my dad reads to us *'Twas the Night Before Christmas*. We all know the story by heart, of course, and we say the lines we remember along with him. It is one of the best feelings to spend time with the people you love, especially when worshipping God and Jesus at Christmas time. So this year, we should all appreciate and love the people we spend Advent with.



When I was little, my mom would interlace her fingers together, enclose them in her hands and say, “Here’s the church.” Then her index fingers would pop up and she would say, “Here’s the steeple.” And finally, with great excitement, she would turn palms to the ceiling, wiggling all her fingers and say, “Open it up and here’s all the people!”

As I got a little older it seemed only natural to continue our little game with the beautiful, white church covered in glitter that my mother put out every year with the Christmas decorations. The bottom had the foundation of the church surrounded by snow and little pine trees. The church building (with a lovely steeple) would then slide on to the foundation. I would fill the church with marbles (cat eyes, Perry’s, and steelies in a multitude of colors) representing people. I would lift up the top and imagine a congregation worth of people in outfits a riot of color. When church let out they were “poured” out the front door and across the floor.

I didn’t really attend church as a child, but as an adult I was astounded every year at the Christmas Eve services. So many people did so much to accomplish those three services. As a member of the choir that sang at all of them, I had a bird’s eye view every year. The brass quartet and the organ played beautiful music from the balcony. When the bell choir played, I swore you could feel the presence of angels. And all the people! The sanctuary was packed, and at the 11 p.m. service the narthex and fireside room would be packed too, with people standing shoulder to shoulder—everyone arrayed in their colorful holiday best, just like the marble congregation of my childhood.

All of this was to celebrate the birth of the Christ child. People were happy to do it; hugs and a loving atmosphere abounded. And I would think to myself, this is what Jesus came for; to save us, change us, and give us a glimpse of how things will be with Him. Just think, if it could be like that all the time and it spread to everyone, we wouldn’t have to pray for peace on Earth anymore. Peace and love would be the norm.

The Advent season is usually a very busy time of year and most people do not take time for themselves, I am lucky that I have two dogs that urge me daily to take them out—even in the Advent season.

One of my favorite things to do is to walk or hike through wooded areas such as state parks. I am lucky that I live right next door to Seven Lakes State Park and can walk out my door and take about 20 steps and then I am in the park. I go just about every day whether it is summer, spring, fall, or winter.

I love going in the winter because it is so peaceful. Very rarely do I see any other person, and the hunters have given up for the season.

I remember last year on Christmas Eve, I had everything ready for the evening and the next day. Dan and I took a long walk around the park. I love making it to the middle of the park where there is a stream that runs through it. When we got to this part we looked for the owl that lives in that area.

Whenever I walk and explore the beauty and bounty of God’s creations I feel at ease and peaceful. I know that God is there and with me. It was especially wonderful on Christmas Eve, for it was an impeccable day. It felt like divine will. It made the day perfect.

“God created humans in the wild and placed us in a garden. We’re meant to live a substantial portion of our life outdoors--and it’s a unique place to experience our Creator and restore our spirits. Nature is God’s reset button for our minds, bodies, and spirits” (Michael Hyatt – <https://michaelhyatt.com>)

If you have the chance this Advent season—especially if you are feeling the stress and business of the season—find a park, take a walk, marvel in God’s creation, and feel the peace. I know I will.



GOD KNOWS YOU
Only Yahweh provides the
Divine Grace that makes us
Kindred brothers and sisters with Jesus
Now and Forever, One...
One in the Body of Christ.
We seek and need God's Spirit, we yearn to
Sing His praise and
Yet, we wander because we are frail.
Open our spirits and hearts...
Up- and our human assumptions
So that we know You
Peggy Fowler, '16



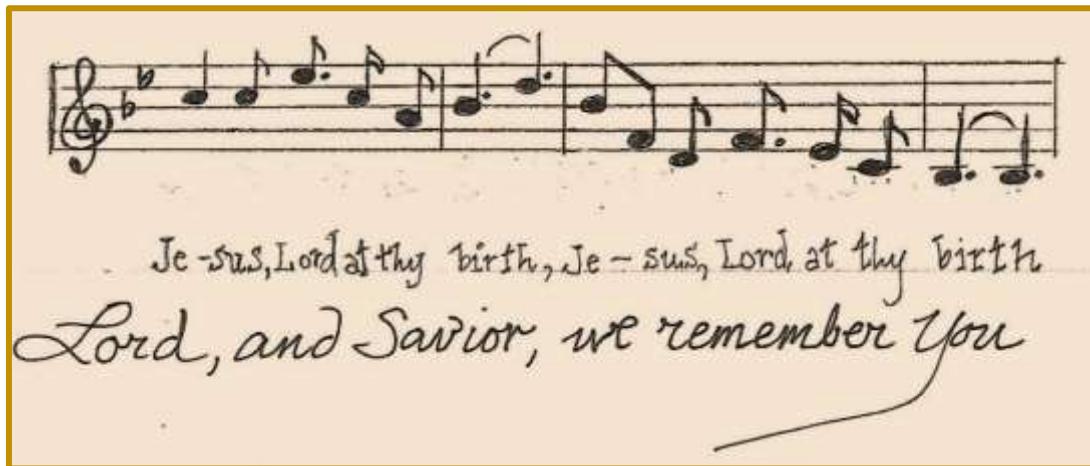
Tuesday, December 20

Lindsey Gibb

1 Samuel 2:1-10; Genesis 21:1-21; Galatians 4:21-5:1

Christmas is most people's favorite time of year. It's filled with parties, gifts, friends and family, beautiful lights, and wonderful food. Most of our schedules become insanely busy around Christmas time. We have so many parties to go to and gifts to buy. For most it's wonderful, but it can also be quite a stressful time.

In the midst of all the Christmas confusion, we lose sight of the true meaning of Christmas. Christmas is about celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. We forget that He is the reason that Christmas was ever celebrated. God sent his only Son down to Earth to save us, and we forget about Him in the midst of all our human affairs. This year, we should all take time to remember the true meaning of Christmas, the birth of Jesus Christ.



P. Fowler '16

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When I was a young child, I always looked forward to Christmas with joy and excitement! I loved the multi-colored lights, the time with family playing games and wondering what presents I might get. There was mystery, but there was always a familiar pattern to Christmas. And how I impatiently waited for Christmas to arrive!

When I was a young adult with a family of my own, I always looked forward to Christmas and to getting ready for Christmas; i.e.; the Advent season. I loved how excited my sons were as they looked forward to Christmas with joy and excitement, but I also loved how eager I was to see their reactions to the special gifts we were giving them for Christmas. I was so excited and impatient for Christmas to arrive!

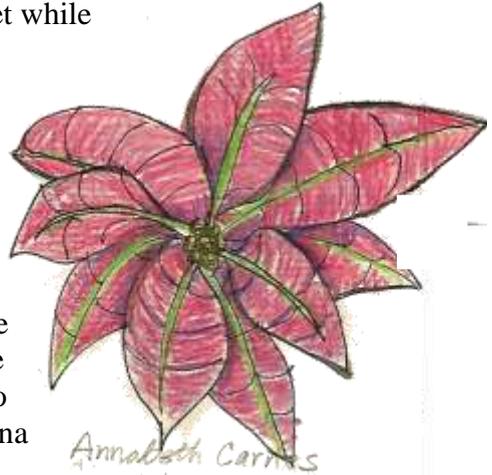
For many years now, I have been very joyful and eager to see what the Advent season brings into my life each year. Preparing to receive and understand God's amazing love and gift to me and to each of us is exciting in different ways. Every year I experience the season with new eyes and a new heart. When we study, pray, look and listen, the joy and the excitement of the season fills our hearts. We experience it in watching its effect on others. We experience it in watching Christmas movies. We experience it as we reach out to others in love and service. It is a time with our family, our church family, and our community. For me, God's immense gift of love to us renews our hope and fills our hearts with love for everyone.



I often wonder if God gets excited for us as we receive His gift? I pray that we will be filled with God's presence so we can share that gift with everyone we meet!

During my time as an elementary Spanish teacher, I read to my fourth graders *The Legend of the Poinsettia* by Tomie dePaola. The story is about a young girl from Mexico named Lucida who is helping her mother make a new blanket for the baby Jesus for the church's nativity scene. Her mother becomes ill, and with the best of intentions, Lucida destroys the blanket while trying to finish it on her own.

On Christmas Eve, Lucida has no gift to bring to the baby Jesus. She meets an old woman outside of the church who provides her with an incredibly powerful and important lesson — “...any gift is beautiful because it is given.” It's the act of giving, not the gift itself, that is important. Lucinda grabs some weeds from the ground and takes them to the baby Jesus. As she lays them at the manger, the weeds turn into beautiful, fiery flowers — la flor de nochebuena (the flower of the Holy Night).



When we think about the gifts presented to Christ at his birth, the little drummer boy's simple gift, in comparison to those of the three wise men, was accepted with the same appreciation and joy. As we prepare to welcome our savior, remember the lesson Lucida learned: It is the act of giving that is important. “Any gift is beautiful because it was given.”

Wishing you and your family all of the blessings of the season!

“Bursting the Seams of Heaven”

LOVE came down to you; *LOVE* came down to me,
LOVE burst the seams of heaven . . .
entered *hiddenly*,

took a shabby, stable bed
in the fragile flesh of a Babe:

in the humble flesh of you, in the frail flesh of me:
bone of our bone, at last, *flesh of our flesh*—
LOVE came down!

(See Lk. 2, Gen. 2:23 & C. Rossetti’s poem “Love Came Down”)

* * *

An imaginative meditation upon Luke 2:6-19:

I hold You in my arms, little Babe.
I feel the *measure* of You; I bear the tiny *burden* of Your weight
for only a moment in time . . .
until the tables turn, and You will bear the weight of *my burden*:
a tiny Babe come to bear *ALL*
so that I may be . . . *free*!

* * *

A prayer/meditation upon the Nativity:

What more do I need to know? —than that *LOVE-came-down* at Christmas
never to leave us “orphans”!
What more do I need to know? —than that silently . . . *LOVE* is here.

I light a candle before a *down-to-earth* symbol
of *LOVE-came-down* at Christmas.
For I am weak and earthly . . . and need such little reminders
that *LOVE-CAME-DOWN*,
that silently . . . *YOU* . . . are *here*!

Lorraine Eshleman



THE GIFT OF HOPE

"Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming." 1 Peter 1:13 (NIV)

Do you remember the one Christmas gift you hoped for most as a kid? Maybe it was a bike, a doll, a game, or a pet. Whatever it was, can you remember how it felt to be consumed by that one desire? When we hope for something, we think about it, dream about it, and watch for it with longing and expectation. Everything we see reminds us of the focus of our longing. That's what this season of Advent is about—expectant waiting. Not waiting for stuff, but waiting for a person. And this kind of hopeful waiting is not passive but active as we prepare our hearts for the celebration of Jesus's coming into the world.

Your longings have probably changed drastically since you hoped for that something special under the Christmas tree. But that familiar feeling of longing returns each year as we look to the gift of hope in Jesus—past, present, and future. Our "hope-so" has become a "know-so." We know the story of Jesus's coming to earth, and as Peter said, we set our hope on the grace to be brought to us when Jesus comes again.

Hope is central to our survival as people. When we lose all hope, our life loses meaning and purpose. And hope is central to our faith. Advent is not just about waiting for Christmas. It is also about waiting for the rest of the story—Jesus's second coming to earth. This hope is based on the promises of God and fulfilled in Jesus's birth, death, and resurrection. So we celebrate Jesus's birth, but we also look forward to and trust in the completion of our hope at His second coming.

What do you hope for this season? How can looking at hope as the promises of God fulfilled in Jesus past, present, and future give you new hope? How will that change the way you live this Advent season?



FUTURE HOPE

"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us." Romans 5:1-5 (NIV)

Cliff-hangers—we love them, and we hate them. They drive us crazy and keep us coming back for more. A cliff-hanger is the end of a story that's not really the end. It leaves us in suspense, waiting in eager anticipation for the rest of the story. The makers of the Star Wars movies are cliff-hanger geniuses, creating suspense that lasts for years until the next movie releases. People are so caught up in the story that they put on costumes and camp out in lines just to be the first to find out the resolution to the cliff-hanger.

We often think of the arrival of Jesus as the end of the story—and it was the fulfillment of many Old Testament prophecies. But did you know there are many more that have yet to be fulfilled? Yes, Jesus's life was action packed. He was born, lived, died, rose again, and went to be with the Father. But that wasn't the end of the story either. Jesus's story in our world is not yet complete. And the same is true of our hope in Him—the completion of hope, when all things are made right, is yet to come.

We live in the time between. And that is why we still feel suffering, pain, and doubt. But in Romans, Paul told us to glory in our sufferings because they produce perseverance that produces character that produces hope. The focus is on the future. Our hope is rooted in what God has done through Jesus but looks forward to the resolution of the cliff-hanger. And we hold tight because we know that we won't be disappointed by hope given to us by the God of love.

How can focusing on Jesus's coming this Christmas season help you hold on to the future hope of the glory of God? How can hope for the future help you face with perseverance the challenges of today?

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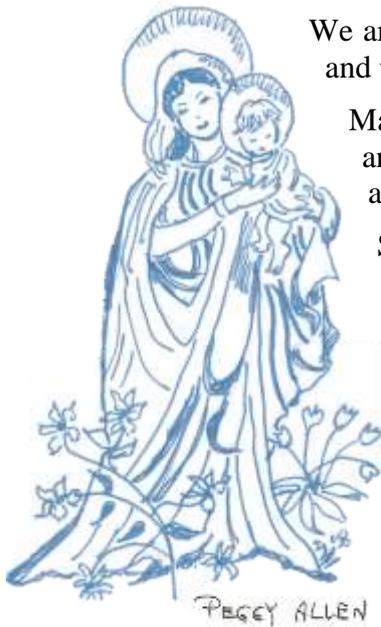
Dedicated to the Memory of
Robert G. Nelson
1946 ~ 2016

We Remember You ~
Your commitment as Elder,
Your dedication to your Faith,
in God & Jesus Christ,
Your caring for fellow
Faith Community Members ~
Now in God's Kingdom ~
WE REMEMBER YOU



Bob was the chairman of the Worship committee for the past three years and a strong advocate of the Advent booklet.

Acknowledgements



We are grateful to all who contributed their thoughts, talents, and time to create this devotional booklet.

Many people from our church family contributed stories and poems to share their memories, traditions, and feelings about the meaning of Advent or Christmas.

Several others from our church family added to the stories and poems by creating artwork. We thank Annabeth Carnes, Peggy Allen, Peggy Fowler, Violet Lanning, and Vera Thornton for sharing their artistic talent. And we also thank Peggy Fowler for overseeing the artwork and adding the beautiful calligraphy throughout the booklet.

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Blessings to all!