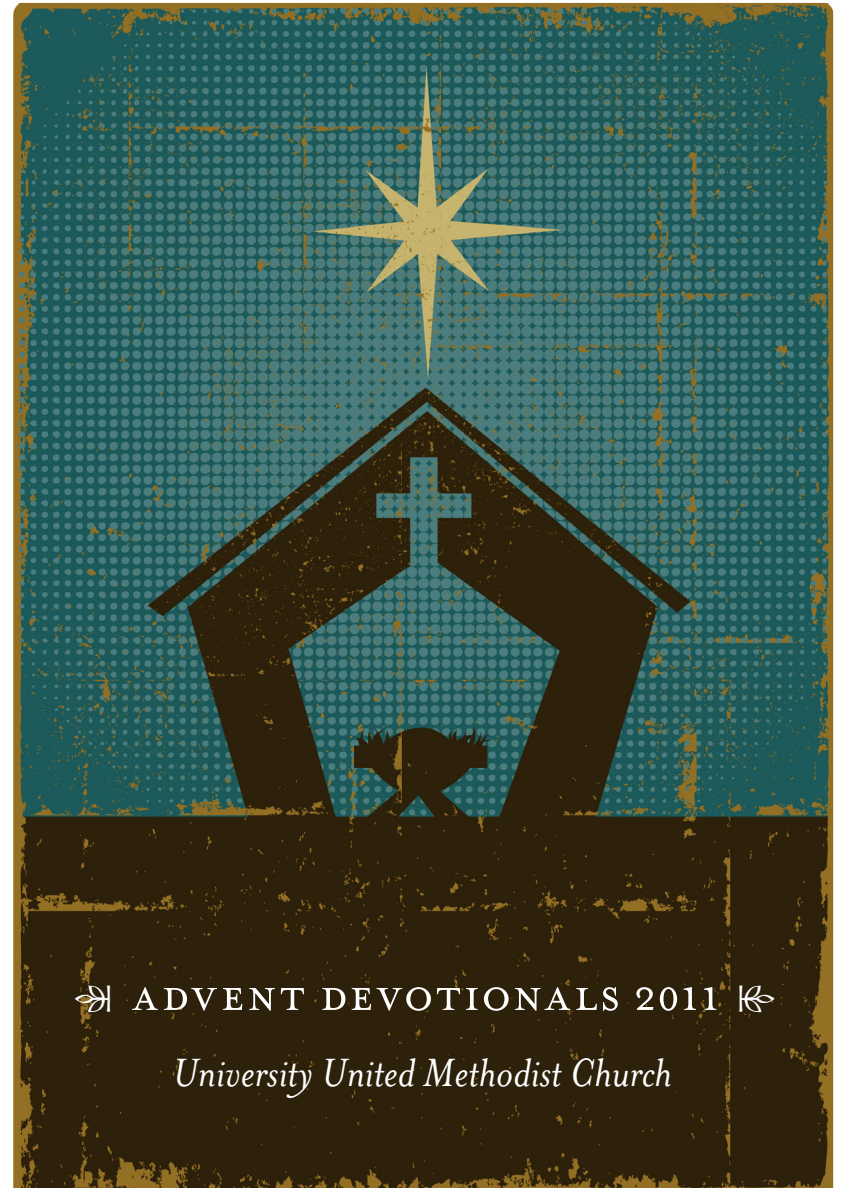
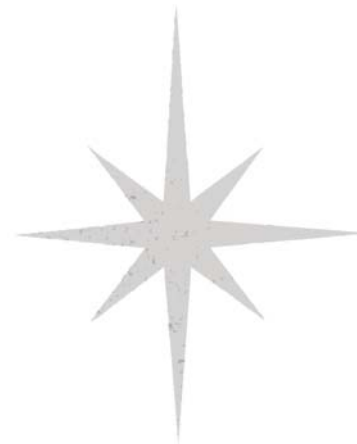


# *On the Edge of Glory*



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# *On the Edge of Glory*

❖ ADVENT DEVOTIONALS 2011 ❖

*University United Methodist Church*

**A**DVENT MEANS MANY THINGS—EXPECTATION, preparation, reflection, celebration. Advent invites us to remember that we live in between the already and the not yet, between the birth of Jesus which we remember and celebrate, and the coming of Christ, the ultimate fulfillment of God's promised redemption of all creation, for which we watch and wait. Advent reminds us that we are called to live our lives on the edge of glory—reflecting, preparing, and expecting Christ to come again into our lives and into our world.

The reflections and meditations contained in this year's Advent Devotional have been submitted by members of our congregation and are intended to serve as companions on the journey of Advent. Read them, reflect on them and allow the Holy Spirit to speak to you through them.

Thanks to all those who participated in this project by submitting devotionals. I also want to personally thank Susan Jensen for coordination of this project, and compiling and editing the document, and Amanda Scallan for designing the cover.

Enjoy this year's Advent Devotional. May it guide you to a deeper experience of this most holy season!

O come, O come, Emmanuel.



Dr. Van A. Stinson  
Senior Minister

walk by. And there it was, a live nativity complete with Mary, Joseph, and Jesus in the manger, a few shepherds, three Wise Men, a couple of angels... and those wretched pink pigs! I was beside myself.

My inclination was to climb on to the stage and remove those heretical pigs. But something else caught my attention—the large crowd that was gathering to see the nativity. People were coming from all directions to see this thing that had come to pass. It was an amazing mix of people—young and old, gay and straight, black and white, seekers and saints, doubters and disciples, long time members and brand new folks—all there gathered around the nativity that should have never been. In that moment, the nativity came alive to me in a whole new way. Here were people I never thought I'd see together in one place gazing upon a scene I never thought ought to be seen in the first place. And then it hit me. Those out of place, unbiblical, theologically questionable pink pigs belong! And not only do the pigs belong, we all belong, no matter what. We belong to God and we belong to one another.

*Christmas... a Savior is born! Good news! Great joy! For us all!*

—Dr. Van A. Stinson  
Senior Minister



“IN THAT region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.’ —Luke 2:8-11

**D**URING ADVENT A FEW YEARS BACK, I HAD RETURNED FROM A LUNCH MEETING ONE DAY ONLY TO DISCOVER THE HALLWAY LEADING to my office lined with pigs. Not literal pigs, mind you, but wooden pigs; small, perfectly symmetrical, well-made wooden pigs in the process of being covered with genuine imitation pink crepe paper pigskin. It was quite a sight indeed!

Knowing that there were often events going on at the church that I knew nothing about, I was intrigued. What were the pigs doing in the hallway leading to my office? Where would their journey take them when their spa-like skin rejuvenation was complete? There was a part of me that had to ask and a part of me that was afraid to know. I inquired about my new found office mates. “Oh, they’re for the live nativity that the children’s council is planning for the Sunday before Christmas.” Nativity? Pigs in a Nativity? For once I did not need to go to the concordance and look that one up. There were no pigs in the nativity. How about some donkeys? What about a few sheep? Maybe a camel or two? But, pigs? You’ve got to be kidding. “Cattle are lowing, the poor baby wakes, but the little Lord Jesus, no bacon he ate.”

Here I was an ordained minister in a mainline church that was doing its best to take the Bible seriously. I had read the story, taught the story, and was preparing once again to preach the story of the birth of the King of the Jews, and here my church was planning to have pigs, pink pigs mind you, in its live nativity. What would people say? What would they think? I mean, after all, pink pigs simply don’t belong. Sunday came. I arrived at the church with fear and trembling in my heart. I avoided the scene until after the first worship service. On the way to teach my Sunday School class, I decided to

“LET every valley be lifted up, And every mountain and hill be made low; And let the rough ground become a plain, And the rugged terrain a broad valley” —Isaiah 40:4

**A**DVENT. AS A CHILD, IT WAS THE SEASON OF KNEELING. WE KNELT NIGHTLY AND MY FATHER READ A PRAYER WHICH ALWAYS BEGAN: “Lord, rouse your power and come.” The prayers included the call of Isaiah 40 to “make straight the paths and make every mountain low,” that awesome display of power. Later, I was introduced to the theology of great tribulation and destruction. The Lord is coming and it is fearful indeed. Advent.

Of all the characters in the Christmas story, I have most often related to the shepherds in the pasture. The great angel choir sings “hosanna” and I have been frozen by fear, failure to understand, and weariness. What am I to do with this awesome display of God coming into this world?

And yet there is another Advent. There is the Advent of Emmanuel, of God with us. There is the Advent of Israel, the *waiting* for the Messiah to deliver. The Advent of Simeon in the Gospel of Luke, who waited and believed until he was presented with a baby for baptism and *saw* “a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” The Advent of Elizabeth and Mary both pregnant and *waiting*: for the Lord who has “lifted the lowly” and “filled the hungry with good things.” *Waiting* and then *seeing* God with us.

So I will pray again this season: “Lord, rouse your power and come.” And I shall *wait*. And if I look, I will *see* that power, that Emmanuel, God with us. I will *see* God’s power in every food drive that “fills the hungry.” I will *see* God in every answered call to provide for the families of prisoners, to comfort the grieving, to provide care for the ill, to lift up the lowly. I will claim the Lord’s coming whenever His church seeks “to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.” (Micah 6:8) I will claim my role as lowly shepherd and, not in fear, but with great joy, make known what has been told to me about this Emmanuel. And I will proclaim the coming, now and tomorrow, of that great Messiah who makes all things new.

*So Advent. I am waiting Lord. I want to see Lord. Lord, rouse your power and come. Come and keep coming always to this world. To me Lord, rouse your power and come.*

—Barbara Albright

“FINALLY, brothers, whatever things are true, whatever things are honest, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.”  
—Philippians 4:8

WHILE IT IS A VERY BUSY TIME, ADVENT IS ONE OF THE HOLIEST TIMES OF YEAR for me. I become reflective and think of those things that are lovely, pure, and good. It may be the rides to see Christmas lights with my nieces and nephews. It may be the family Christmas service where the Chapel Choir and alums sing “Joy to the World.” It may be something simpler such as the lighting of the Advent wreath. I love these quiet moments at Christmas time the most. Usually we’re in such a rush before Christmas with all the festivities that we don’t take time to reflect on these good things. Perhaps this year God is asking us to stop and take a moment to reflect on the things that are pure, lovely, and good.

*Lord, in this busy time of year, help us to stop and take time for You and to remember the precious gift of Your son, Jesus Christ.*

—Martha Stuckey



SILENT NIGHT, HOLY NIGHT  
All is calm, all is bright  
Round you Virgin Mother and Child  
Holy Infant so tender and mild  
Sleep in heavenly peace  
Sleep in heavenly peace.

Silent night, holy night!  
Shepherds quake at the sight  
Glories stream from heaven afar  
Heavenly hosts sing Alleluia!  
Christ, the Saviour is born  
Christ, the Saviour is born.

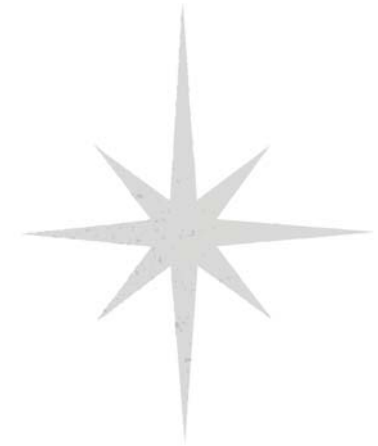
Silent night, holy night  
Son of God, love’s pure light  
Radiant beams from Thy holy face  
With the dawn of redeeming grace  
Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth  
Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth.

*[words by Josef Mohr, circa 1816; music by Franz X. Gruber]*

ADVENT IS A SPECIAL SEASON IN THE LIFE OF OUR CHURCH. ALL THE KIDS PERFORM A PLAY. I AM USUALLY AN ANGEL. THIS YEAR, I have a solo! One of the things I love most about Christmas at our church is singing “Silent Night” on Christmas Eve. The sanctuary is dark, except for the glow of the candles. It looks so beautiful. It is as gorgeous as a clear, night sky—like the clear, starry night when Jesus was born.

I love Christmas at our church.

—Virginia Moore  
(age 6)



“... FOR BEHOLD, I bring you good tidings of great joy...” —Luke 2:10

**D**URING THIS SEASON OF ADVENT, AS WE ALL LOOK FORWARD TO THE BIRTH OF THE CHRIST CHILD, OUR FAMILY IS EXPERIENCING the anticipation of another joyous event—the birth of our first grandchild. Looking forward to this miraculous experience, I cannot help but flash back to the time 33+ years ago when I was cradling this child’s father in my arms. Of course, there were a multitude of feelings surging through us at that time—from excitement and gratitude to no small bit of trepidation over the responsibility we had just taken on and the upcoming changes in our lives that, although welcome, were as yet unknown. And yet the strongest feeling, and one I can revisit even today, was the sense of overwhelming joy and love from somewhere deep within. It is impossible to describe—in fact, I’m not sure we even have words in the English language to adequately express it.

For the first time I believed I could understand, in a way I had never expected, the awe and wonder that must have filled Mary and Joseph—even though our wondrous event took place at a very different time of the year, in a very different place, in a very different world. A friend recently described it as feeling that a piece of her puzzle had fallen into place—a piece she had never known was missing. Perhaps that is a part of the reason God sent his Son to us as a small Child—that we might better know His love for us.

*Dear Loving God, help us to see, that while we are experiencing the overwhelming joy of seeing You in the face of Your Child, our child, any child—we are also experiencing first-hand the part of You that is within us. Amen.*

—Erin Hawkins

**E**VERYDAY WE GO THROUGH OUR LIVES, AND EVERYDAY WE OVERLOOK ONE OF THE MOST powerful gifts God has given us—remembrance. While remembrance does not have the same emotional satisfaction as hope and love, it defines who we are, not just to other people, but to ourselves as well. Throughout the years, and though old age may come, our power of remembrance is awe-inspiring. We remember little details about people we meet. In a way, we help keep them alive. If a person were to be completely forgotten by everyone, including himself, who would he be? He would no longer be the person he was, as the person he was would no longer exist. All the aspects that defined who he was would be gone. So when Jesus asks us to remember him every time we have communion, he is asking us to help keep him alive. In Luke 23:42, the good thief says, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Thus the man asks Jesus to help him live, to be remembered. Through our remembrance, God’s word can be taught and his messages spread. If we forget him, though, all that he strived for when he was alive will be for naught. So while you are loving your neighbor as you love yourself, and while you are praying for those in need, please do not forget to remember both the living and the dead, so that all may live eternally.

*Dear God, help me to remember those who feel lost, so they may find their way. Help me remember the people I meet, so when they are feeling most-helpless, they will be comforted by my remembrance. And Lord, help me remember You, so that I do not wander alone, guided by only my own beliefs, but rather by Your will. Amen.*

—Mike Hughes

“**T**HEN he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.” —Luke 23:42

“Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’” —1 Kings 19:11b-13

**T**HE ADVENT SEASON IS ALWAYS A BUSY ONE – IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH, AS WELL AS AT HOME. CHRISTMAS, THOUGH KNOWN FOR bringing joy and good cheer, also brings stress, anxiety, and this insistent need to rush, to hurry. We get caught up in the gift buying, the day-after-Thanksgiving sales, cleaning the house in expectation of friends and family coming to visit. It’s easy to lose track of God in the midst of our busy, busy lives.

This is why I find the scripture about Elijah so interesting: he’s looking for God’s presence, seeking Him out, yet He isn’t found in those places we would expect. A strong wind comes, then an earthquake, and finally a fire, things that are full of power, that call our attention to them—our awe, our fear, yet God is not in any of those things. Instead, Elijah finds God’s presence in the silence.

How often do we try to find God’s presence in the big things, the chaotic things, the stressful things—the things that often pull us away from God because we are too busy to make Him a part of them? Instead, during this Advent Season, we should look for God in the silence; we should make time for him apart from the busyness of the season. We need to listen to God’s voice, calling to us, asking us to remember the reason we are here.

*God, please help us as we seek out your presence. Guide us through this season and keep our hearts and minds set upon you. Let us not lose ourselves in the stress and chaos that oftentimes surrounds these next couple of months, God, and help us to find the silence and be more fully with you.*

—Jessica Lowe  
Children’s Ministry Intern

“THEN David and all Israel played music before God with all their might, with singing, on harps, on stringed instruments, on tambourines, on cymbals, and with trumpets.”—1 Chronicles 13:8

**M**Y SISTER LAURIE AND I, WEARING OUR FLANNEL NIGHTGOWNS, ARE SITTING SIDE BY SIDE ON THE FLOOR, LOOKING OUT OUR bedroom window at our neighborhood, sparkling with colorful, twinkling lights. Our tall, red Christmas candle casts a flickering, magical glow on our window panes and on the walls of our room; it is dark outside. The window is cold to the touch, and it fogs up while we are singing. The minor key carols are our favorites, and we are singing “We Three Kings of Orient Are” in perfect harmony, amazed at the sound of our own voices.

Though we are young, we know—we can feel—the world is different, better somehow. With love in our hearts and with our purest voices we keep singing: “Silent Night,” first in English, then in Spanish; then “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear” and “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing.”

The season of love, the season of giving is here again, thank goodness. I have been waiting and practicing my songs all year long.

*It came upon the midnight clear,  
That glorious song of old,  
From angels bending near the earth,  
To touch their harps of gold:  
“Peace on the earth, goodwill to men  
From heavens all gracious King!”  
The world in solemn stillness lay  
To hear the angels sing.*

(words by Edmund Hamilton Sears, 1849; music by Richard Storrs Willis, 1859)

*May our hearts be filled with love and music every day of the year. Thank you, God, for bringing families and loved ones together to sing, remember, and rejoice as we celebrate Christmas. Amen.*

—Susan Jensen

“So I commend enjoyment, for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat, and drink, and enjoy themselves, for this will go with them in their toil throughout the days of life that God gives them under the sun.” —Ecclesiastes 8:15

**P**ICKED UP THIS BOOK THE OTHER DAY TITLED *SNARK, THE HERALD ANGELS SING: SARCASM, BITTERNESS AND THE HOLIDAY SEASON* by Lawrence Dorfman. For some reason on that afternoon, I really felt snarky (definition: irritable, cranky). Thought that a book of humorous quotes and stories from other people might just jar me out of my “snarky” state. It worked! I started to giggle, snicker and then just downright laugh out loud. Funny how reading about someone else’s unpleasant, funny or sarcastic view of the holidays put me in a better mood. Then I started to really examine the way I view the holidays. Do I look forward with excitement and anticipation or do I look back and remember the stress and chaos of holidays past? I think I do both. Looking back, I see disappointment, frustration, anxiety, and “snarkiness.” Most of it is brought on by my own need to create the “Martha Stewart” holiday in my “Roseanne” world. I want perfection! I want pretty! I want the magic! It never quite comes out the way I want it—people get in the way. But as I think about it, people, and all that comes with them, are what make the holidays, well...the holidays. Why work so hard for the perfect magical holiday, if not to create a sense of excitement and anticipation for someone else? So this year, I will try to look forward with excitement, anticipation, joy, gladness and maybe even some serenity. But chances are, those past feelings of anxiety, frustration and disappointment will pop up. However, this year, I have a new word to give to those feelings—“snarky.” Just saying it makes me laugh; it’s working already.

*Dear Lord, You have given to us the gifts of laughter and joy. You have created a world of beauty and magic. In this season of expectation, please help me to look forward with excitement and joy and not back with frustration, anxiety, and disappointment. I thank you for this time of year and all that comes with it; the good and the not so good. I ask that you continue to help me find the silly in the serious, the funny in the frustrating and the humor in the hustle & bustle. In Jesus name I ask it, Amen.*

—Kyle Wooldridge

“FOR WHOEVER would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.” —Mark 8:35

### THE GREATEST MISCONCEPTION

**A**S I RECALL MY EARLIER NON-INTENTIONAL YEARS, I REGULARLY PROCRASTINATED A DEEPER FAITH JOURNEY BECAUSE I WAS HAVING too much fun in life. At least I thought I was. Becoming a real Christian meant that I had to wake up the next day, put on my little bow tie and suit, grab my Bible and be prepared to head out into the world ready to preach the Gospel. You see, I thought being a Christian meant I had to be perfect, live a perfect life, and lose my identity.

Many of us grew up in churches and attend regularly because that’s how we were raised. Some of us had to be hit in the knees with a baseball bat before realizing that we needed God’s presence in our lives. The latter was what it took for me. After reaching the stage of complete brokenness, I made the decision to faithfully go to church every Sunday no matter what and submit my life to God’s will. Of course I had no clue what that meant, but thanks to my upbringing I knew that was the direction I needed to head.

It wasn’t long after that decision that a young associate pastor noticed my family, a new family to the church, faithfully in attendance for several Sundays. He invited me to lunch one day, and that led to several events: formation of a new adult Sunday school class of which my wife and I were leaders, formation of many new friendships that I call the best in my life today, formation of a path forward as a youth Sunday school teacher, volunteer, and confirmation leader. I also participated in several studies, enjoyed many other milestones in my faith journey and resigned a corporate career to become the Director of Youth Ministries here at UUMC. Basically, that one decision to give it all to God began the formation of my faith



(continued)

Thursday, December 1, 2011

*(continued from previous page)*

journey, which has no doubt been the single most powerful thing that has occurred in my life.

At some point, I began to realize that all of those people at my church were just as broken as I was (and still am for that matter). I realized how wrong my impression was about what being a Christian meant. I realized what being a Christian was all about: the intentional Journey. Each step bringing me closer and closer to Christ and what it means to be a real Christian. By intentionally worshiping, studying, giving, loving, and growing in Christ, I have truly found my life. I love what I do here at UUMC and in the business world. God has blessed my response to him in more ways than I can possibly verbalize in this short devotion. I pray that one day everyone who reads this will allow God the opportunity to work in their lives like he has in mine. By going to church that first day, I didn't lose my life. I found it.

*Dear Lord, thank you for the life you have entrusted to me. Please open my eyes to the ways in which I can live this life in a way that glorifies you by using the gifts and talents you have given to me. Challenge me to see the ways in which I can more intentionally strengthen my faith in you and make the path clear for me to gain the life you intended for me.*

—Chris King  
Director of Youth Ministries

Tuesday, December 20, 2011

“...I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.”  
—Luke 2:10b

#### WORDS FROM THE CHILDREN:

“CHRISTMAS is special because it is Jesus' birthday. And we do Advent. And we do a show.”

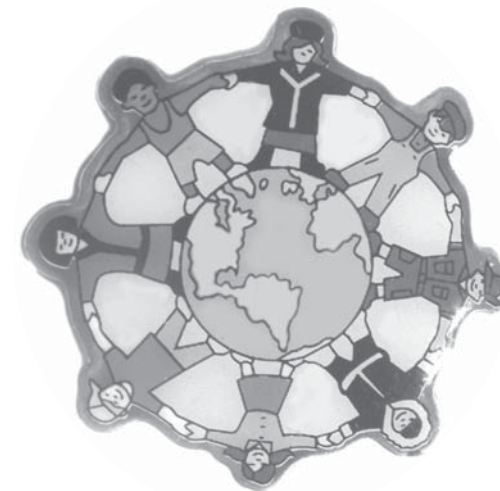
“GO, JESUS!”

“CHRISTMAS ... because its Jesus' birthday!”

—K & 1st Grade Sunday School

“ADVENT celebrates the coming or arrival of Jesus' birth. We light special candles during this time.”

—2nd & 3rd Grade Sunday School



*O God, may we all be open to the possibilities that Advent and Christmas bring us. Amen.*

“AND the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. —Philippians 4:7

### CREDO AT CHRISTMAS

**A**T CHRISTMAS TIME I BELIEVE THE THINGS THAT CHILDREN DO.

*I believe with English children* that holly placed in windows will protect our homes from evil.

*I believe with Swiss children* that the touch of edelweiss will charm a person with love.

*I believe with Italian children* that La Befana is not an ugly doll but a good fairy who will gladden the heart of all.

*I believe with Greek children* that coins concealed in freshly baked loaves of bread will bring good luck to anyone who finds them.

*I believe with German children* that the sight of a Christmas tree will lessen hostility among adults.

*I believe with French children* that lentils soaked and planted in a bowl will rekindle life in people who have lost hope.

*I believe with Dutch children* that the horse Sleipner will fly through the sky and fill the earth with joy.

*I believe with Swedish children* that Jultomte will come and deliver gifts to the poor as well as to the rich.

*I believe with Finnish children* that parties held on St. Stephen's Day will erase sorrow.

*I believe with Danish children* that the music of a band playing from a church tower will strengthen humankind.

*I believe with Bulgarian children* that sparks from a Christmas log will create warmth in human souls.

*I believe with American children* that the sending of Christmas cards will build friendships.

*I believe with all children* that there will be peace on earth.

by Daniel Roselle

(from *Graces*; © 1994 by June Corner; HarperCollins)

“BE DEVOTED to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves.”—Romans 12:10

**S**HORTLY AFTER I BEGAN RETIREMENT, A FRIEND FROM OUR CHURCH TOLD ME THAT I MIGHT ENJOY GETTING TO KNOW A BUNCH OF guys that he had associated with on occasion since he had retired about a year earlier. Little did I know that this conversation would lead to many blessings for me and an opportunity to serve our church as well.

This group of mostly “old guys,” some of whom are well up in their 70s, join together with a leader who is just over 90 years old. This group of guys, and on occasion a younger lady or two, gather weekly and share their gifts as indicated in the cited scripture. They build houses that become homes... safe refuge for families who have never had a home of their own.

My question to myself before I first visited this group was “what do I have to offer?” I had experience driving nails around the house, I knew how to use a handsaw, and could cut a reasonably straight line if I tried real hard... but little else, I thought.

It did not matter one bit. I would soon learn that I would walk amongst “giants” that I could learn skills from if I was willing to sweat (it was July when I started) and as my dad used tell me when I was an indolent teenager, “Son, make yourself generally useful.” Making myself available for “service” was the key.

What did I learn? Well, I am proud to say that many of the regular volunteers of this group (Habitat for Humanity) are fellow Methodists; others are Catholics, Baptists, and so forth. Folks who would not likely recite the above scripture, but who truly exemplify “many who are one body in Christ” serving our fellow man freely for the love of serving alone. Many are like me who had little to offer, but found much fellowship and pleasure in shared labor... and even a few new skills to use around the house.

*Lord, help us to open up our hearts to find and offer the gifts that you have freely given us. Often we don't even realize what we have to offer until we just join with others in our midst to help those who need a little support. Help us to have ears to listen to your call and willing hearts to serve in any way we can.*

—Kerry Hawkins

“ONE of the teachers of the law came to Jesus. He heard Jesus arguing with the Sadducees and the Pharisees. He saw that Jesus gave good answers to their questions. So he asked him, “Which of the commands is the most important?” Jesus answered, “The most important command is this: ‘People of Israel, listen! The Lord our God is the only Lord. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.’ The second most important command is this: ‘Love your neighbor the same as you love yourself.’ These two commands are the most important.” —Mark 12:28-31

OUR SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON RECENTLY WAS ON “LOVE.” WHAT A GREAT TOPIC TO COVER AS WE PREPARE OURSELVES FOR THE Advent Season. We talked about how easy it is to love and care for those “like us” ... our friends, neighbors, church family—but the real challenge is to show our love to those who we don’t know or those who are so very different.

As we discussed and shared the ways we show our love during this season of giving, the list seemed to grow and grow. Toys for Tots, canned goods for the Food Pantry, wrapping presents for parents, singing at nursing homes, visiting a Leukemia Hospital, donating gifts, Operation Christmas Child, adopting a dog, adopting a child, writing letters to people, sending goods to the Army ....

The ever-stimulating class discussion was summarized so eloquently by several students—and we share these inspirational messages for you to ponder and reflect:

“Remember, even though there is a lot of stress, Christmas is about Jesus being born.”

“Christmas isn’t about receiving stuff, it’s about giving.”

*Dear Lord, we are grateful for the youth of our church and the many ways that they inspire and refresh us with their innocence and candor. Help us today to love one another—help us to seek out someone today that needs our kind words, kind deeds, or perhaps just our smile.*

—Marcia McKinzie and the UUMC Middle School Class

“BUT earnestly desire the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.” — 1 Corinthians 12:31

HOW DO WE PREPARE FOR ONE OF THE GREATEST OCCASIONS ON THE CHRISTIAN CALENDAR? It depends. What does “greatest” mean? The biggest present under the Christmas tree? The perfect party dress for the holidays? The gorgeous piece of jewelry that your husband surprised you with? Having the money to buy it all—or at least a halfway decent line of credit? It seems these days, specifically during the holiday season, that we all want bigger, better, faster, stronger, fancier, richer...you get the idea.

But what if we step back and consider true greatness for a moment:

*“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.” —John 3:16*

Maybe our culture has lost the point of reference for “greatness.” Christianity spends the rest of the calendar year emphasizing traits such as generosity, kindness, humility, and faith. The “holiday season” is exactly the right time for us to prayerfully consider how much we can give, and how much we have already been given. What if instead of focusing on great “stuff” we focus on gifts of true greatness? Without a purchase being made or a line of credit incurred, we have all been given the gift of God’s everlasting love in our life, and His only begotten son, Jesus Christ.

*Dear Lord, during this holiday season please help me to appreciate the greatness of the many gifts You have given and continue to give in my life. May I learn from Your actions and use Your gifts to bring happiness to others by sharing Your story and focusing on the true greatness of Christmas—the birth of Your Son, Jesus Christ.*

— David & Kelly Surace

“IF we live in the spirit, let us also walk in the spirit.”—Galatians 5:25

**I**T IS MY FAVORITE TIME OF YEAR: THE LIGHT...THE FALL COLORS. CYPRESS GREENS GIVE WAY TO REDS AND BROWNS. IN A GEOGRAPHY where we use A/C six months of the year, I can open the windows and doors and let fall fresh air in.

It is a time for harmony and reflection. The ghosts of friends and relatives tap my shoulder in a December rain, or touch my cheek in a subtle morning breeze. The anxiety of day to day concerns melt in the realization of life's abundant gifts.

O Great Spirit,  
 whose voice I hear in the winds  
 and whose breath gives life to all the world, hear me.  
 I am small and weak.  
 I need your strength and wisdom.  
  
 Let me walk in beauty and make my eyes  
 ever behold the red and purple sunset.  
 Make my hands respect the things you have made  
 and my ears sharp to hear your voice.  
 Make me wise so that I may understand  
 the things you have taught my people.  
 Let me learn the lessons you have hidden  
 in every leaf and rock.  
  
 I seek strength, not to be superior to my brother,  
 but to fight my greatest enemy—myself.  
 Make me always ready to come to you  
 with clean hands and straight eyes,  
 so when life fades, as the fading sunset,  
 my spirit will come to you  
 without shame.

(American Indian prayer; adapted; Lakota Chief Yellow Lark, 1877)

—David Jensen

“I BRING you good news of great joy which will come to all the people; For to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord, And this will be a sign for you; you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.”—Luke 2:10-12

**T**HERE IS A CHARM ABOUT A CHRISTMAS PAGEANT. IT'S THE SAME OLD, LOVELY STORY. THE SAME SHEPHERD'S CROOKS AND GLITTERING crowns, the angels wings used last year and the year before brought out from their hiding places in closets around the church. Yet the telling of the story has its own special touches. For some, it is the excitement of the first Christmas pageant ever. For others, as they grow the roles are changed... from lambs to shepherds, from camel to king. The timid frightened singers become strong leaders a few years later, carrying the melody or soaring in the descent.

What makes the annual Christmas pageant so exciting every year are the many mini-dramas, the subplots being acted out to the discerning critic's eye. One year two boys fell off the risers. One chorister got sick. Two singers, playing the director's role, tried to tell, suggest, and push each other into the proper place. But the mini-drama which intrigued me the most was the camel, patient and persistent, who tried his best to get a glimpse of the infant king who had caused all this stir. Again and again he tried to inch his way between the cluster of shepherds and lambs, singers and angels...but no one would budge. In the singing of the great glad tidings, they effectively blocked the camel from the manger. When he finally gave up, he must have thought “it would be easier to pass through the eye of the needle, than to get a look at Mary's baby boy.”

Sometimes I wonder if in all our celebration we block the way of those who would see Jesus. Our celebrations and our pageants, our partying and gift exchange, our decorating and feasting are not the reason for the season. Rather they would be a sign of joy, light of love leading others to bow before this greatest gift of God. “O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord.”

“O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray; Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today” (Phillips Brooks)

—Rev. Phil Woodland

“TRUST in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.”—Proverbs 3:5-6 (NIV)

**T**OO MANY TIMES IN LIFE WE TRY TO SOLVE OUR OWN PROBLEMS AND TRY TO ANSWER QUESTIONS BEYOND OUR COMPREHENSION. We seek out friends, family, coworkers, pastors, teachers, sometimes people we don't even know, and ask for their advice about what we should do and how we should handle a certain situation.

It seems that, as humans, we get help from other people to solve our problems; which begs the question: What is left for God to help with?

God is here to help with every aspect of your life, even the little things that the people you seek advice from don't care about. He wants you to ask for help with things because he loves you and he wants to help you. God is the only being who will always help with your best interests at heart, with no ulterior motives, and no reason to put you second.

Too many times, when we are faced with tough problems and tough decisions, we tend to do what is socially accepted or what is politically correct, and we are steered in the wrong direction and make the wrong choices.

Inquire of God; His guidance may not come right that second, or in the next hour, or in the next day; but if you keep your eyes, ears, mind, and heart open, believing that his answer will come through and deliver you from whatever circumstances you find yourself in, He shall provide the best answer for you.

*God, we come to your awesome presence now asking you to hear this humble cry of our hearts. Lord, help us to seek your guidance in every decision that we make, because you care about every aspect of our lives and you want to see us prosper in your name. Help us to put you first, because when you are our first option, nothing can go wrong.*

—Trevis Hargrove

## PRAYERS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

### JAPANESE PRAYER

*Creator of the world  
Help us love one another,  
Help us care for each other  
As sister or brother,  
That friendship my grow  
From nation to nation.  
Bring peace to our world  
O Lord of Creation*

—Author Unknown

### AN IRISH BLESSING

*May there always be work for your hands  
to do  
May your purse always hold a coin or two  
May the sun always shine upon your  
window pane  
May a rainbow be certain to follow each  
rain  
May the hand of a friend always be near to  
you and  
May God fill your heart with gladness to  
cheer you.*

—Author Unknown

### ANCIENT CHINESE PRAYER

*Heaven is my father and earth my mother and even such  
a small creature as I finds an intimate place in its midst.  
That which extends throughout the universe, I regard as  
my body and that which directs the universe, I regard as  
my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters and all  
things are my companion.*

—Chang Tsai  
(11th Century)

### GERMAN PRAYER

*We thank Thee, Heavenly Father,  
For all things bright and good;  
The seedtime and the harvest,  
Our life, our health, our food.*

—From the German of Matthias Claudius (1740-1815)



“I CAME to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ... Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” —Luke 12:49, 51

**A**MID THE EGGNOG AND FRUITCAKE, WE MIGHT BE TEMPTED TO MISS THE DOSE OF TRUTH ADVENT OFFERS. I’LL BE AMONG THE FIRST TO say it’s sweet to remember the softer side of Christmas with the manger and the gurgling baby in his swaddling blanket. Still, it is just as fitting to remember this season also serves us a harsher reality.

The Nativity and the shelter of the crèche are true, but so is the controversy Jesus causes. Just when we distant followers of Jesus think that all is gentle and calm in the Savior’s hands, Jesus himself assures us of the wilder side of his ministry too. Not everything about his presence whiffs of baby powder and lilt like lullabies. The Nativity and manger are only the first glimpses of a larger controversy Jesus causes the world.

The way of Jesus on earth creates problems. Problems like dividing families and separating friends. Too often I desire to take the controversy out of Christ’s arrival on earth. But to do that—to tame Jesus and smooth out his rough edges—is to deny the conflict he brings with his call.

Do you remember *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* in CS Lewis’ work *The Chronicles of Narnia*? In that novel, it was Mr. Beaver who knows best how to anticipate the challenge that Aslan the Lion brings. “Safe? Who said anything about safe?” Mr. Beaver says to Lucy. “Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good.” As with Aslan the Lion, so with Jesus the Lord.

Then again, with Jesus, who said anything about safe? Don’t let the little baby in the manger fool us. He’s not safe. But good...

*Come Lord Jesus, Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Light your fire in our lives that we may live with your passion. Inspire us Lord to know your presence does not always make our lives easier, but better, bolder and more holy. Lord have mercy on us this day and throughout this season of your reappearing.*

— Jay Hogewood  
Minister of Congregational Care

“THEN shall the dust return to earth as it was: and the spirit shall return to God who gave it.”—Ecclesiastes 12:7 (KJV)

## DUST AND SPIRIT

**W**HEN I WAS TEACHING A POETRY COURSE FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS, ONE OF ROBERT FROST’S POEMS, “THE WOOD-PILE,” struck me with new meaning one day. It was about a man coming upon an abandoned wood-pile in the middle of a swamp. He puzzles over a woodsman’s doing so much work chopping and binding together these logs and then not using them. What a waste, he thinks. But then he realizes that nature will use them “With the slow smokeless burning of decay.” The class began to think of how this was so—how, for instance, new seeds dropped by birds would be nourished by the rich soil created by the decaying wood and plants would spring up to create new seeds for the birds to carry on to other fertile places. The idea stayed with me later and I began thinking how it could relate to non-material things, in particular to the spirit that animates the body. This poem resulted.

### Frost’s Wood-pile—Afterthoughts

Frost’s wood-pile set me thinking about me—  
Will flesh and bones and mind (divided, too,  
In measures meant to serve a useful end)  
Be taken up when once discarded here,  
Diffused, absorbed, to create something new?  
If sticks of wood aren’t wasted in a swamp,  
Will mind expire, of less regard than flesh,  
(Which finally flowers in the teeming earth,)  
Or will it seek another human place,  
Or pulse within some universal mind?

Three years ago when our dear son Kevin died at 47, I sought comfort wherever I could find it. In the Bible I found affirmation of life after death like that in Ecclesiastes, and Jesus’ promise that “if I go and prepare a place

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for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there you shall be also.” (John 14:3) Surely our vibrant son’s spirit would not die—I felt that this had to be true. I listened to comforting ministers, like dear Phil Woodland and a retired minister cousin, Bob Waddell. I read helpful books like Leslie Weatherhead’s *Why Do Men Suffer?* My faith cried “Yes” and, as I’d always believed that faith and reason must agree, I came back to my old poem and found that reason agreed. Whatever transformation it might make, Kevin’s spirit would never die. The cycle of birth, death, and resurrection goes on.

*“May we blend our faith and learning till they carve a single course and our seeking and our yearning join in praising you their source.”* (From Shawn Anglim’s favorite hymn, “Praise the Source of Faith and Learning,” Thomas H. Troeger)

—Carol Moore



**C**HANGE. KAREN ARMSTRONG ENDS HER EPILOGUE TO *THE CASE FOR GOD WITH A STORY WHICH EXEMPLIFIES JESUS’ ADMONITION.*

“One day a Brahmin priest came across the Buddha sitting in contemplation under a tree and was astonished by his serenity, stillness, and self-discipline. The impression of immense strength channeled creatively into an extraordinary peace reminded him of a great tusker elephant. ‘Are you a god, sir?’ the priest asked. ‘Are you an angel ... or a spirit?’ No, the Buddha replied. He explained that he had simply revealed a new potential in human nature. It was possible to live in this world of conflict and pain at peace and in harmony with one’s fellow creatures. There was no point in merely believing it; you would discover its truth only if you practiced his method, systematically cutting off egotism at the root. You would then live at the peak of your capacity, activate parts of the psyche that normally lie dormant, and become a fully enlightened human being. ‘Remember me,’ the Buddha told the curious priest, ‘as one who is awake.’”

The Buddha told the priest to practice the Buddha’s method. Christians must systematically practice the teachings of Jesus. John Wesley taught that we should follow a daily routine of prayer, scripture study, and good works meant to nurture the light of Jesus in our hearts. Advent is a perfect time to reignite that light and “change our hearts and lives.”

*Lord, help us change our hearts and lives.*

—Greg Toney  
Church Council Chair  
Chancel Choir Member

“FROM that time Jesus began to announce, ‘Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!’  
—Matthew 3:17

“WHEN life is heavy and hard to take, go off by yourself. Enter the silence. Bow in prayer. Don’t ask questions: Wait for hope to appear. Don’t run from trouble. Take it full-face. The “worst” is never the worst.”  
—Lamentations 3:28-30

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coercive cheer of the holiday season. It reminds me that Advent is as much about feeling the absence of God, the not-here-yet-ness of Christ, as it is about relishing the joy to come. Anticipation can be thrilling, but it can be fearful, too. Whatever our sentiment, Lamentations challenges us to stop, embrace silence, and “wait for hope to appear” (verses 28-29). From deep despair, the speaker affirms that God sees us. God hears our lamentations. So too does Christ on the cross feel and mourn God’s absence along with us.

To embrace Advent is to embrace the conflicted feelings that accompany waiting. It is to seek hope in God’s promise of loving-kindness, of God-with-us, even when we feel abandoned.

*Lord, as we prepare for your coming, give us courage to navigate moments where you seem absent. Make us wise in the darkness, knowing when to offer comfort and when to sit in silence. Work through us to be Immanuel to and alongside those who wait for you.*

—John Fletcher

“THEN I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I; send me!’”—Isaiah 6:8

THESE ARE A LARGE PAINTING HANGING IN THE PENTAGON THAT SHOWS A MILITARY FAMILY ON THEIR KNEES PRAYING IN A CHAPEL.

This verse is displayed beneath it. Every day for ten years I would pass this painting on my way to my office in the morning. I often looked at it wondering what it really meant. What was the artist thinking when he painted it? What did it mean to me? Throughout the years, this scripture has spoken to me in different ways that responded to the state of my life at that time. We know that God calls us in many ways to go for Him.

We are reminded of this in the hymn, “Who Shall I Send?”

*“Those who are called God purifies and daily when gives us strength to bend our thoughts, our skills, our energies and life itself to this one end.”*

As we approach the Advent season and celebrate the birth of the Holy child, it’s appropriate that we reflect on how God called on Jesus to go for Him and how we will go when we are called.

*Gracious God, we are grateful for your love and wisdom and just as you sent Jesus to go for us, we pray that when You call us, we will be ready to go for You. Amen.*

—Gene Sands

“THE LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.” —Zephaniah 3:17 (KJV)

**I** ADORE THE SEASON OF ADVENT, THE ANTICIPATION OF REVISITING MY CHRISTMAS MEMORIES. YET I OFTEN NEED musical help to prepare for the season. The very word DECEMBER will trigger my innate fear that I may not be able to achieve, what my husband calls, “a Rockwell Christmas.” My family (and those who sit near me in Church) will be astounded to learn that music is my path to peace. Every year, I tiptoe around to hear choir rehearsals—any choir: Chancel, Chapel, Bells, or Wesley and Asbury Singers rehearsing, and their melodies lead me to serenity, a reminder that I celebrate HIS birth.

It seems a special gift from God to be able to recall times of happiness vividly; yet the hurts and sorrows are tempered and diminished by time.

I am engulfed by memories of unforgettable moments: a little girl holding oh so tightly to her sister’s hand as we waited to see if Santa had really managed to get a shiny new bicycle onto his sleigh, and the rush of delight when we knew he had managed this feat. My usual feelings of jealousy for my “oh too cute sister” were quelled by sharing her delight. Even then I was learning that joy is always enhanced by sharing with others.

Memories of a Christmas Eve sermon, when a kick from my unborn daughter shared the gift of her existence; the children of our church, in their special Christmas attire, singing on the steps of Magnolia Mound; and the innocent delight of tiny children, their eyes aglow as the sounds and stories of Christmas fill them with wonder. The thrill of seeing my son released from an airport corridor, grinning when he spots me.

I savor each moment of this special time, not spoiled by the knowledge that a year is a long time to wait. I know it will be worth it when I hear those choruses, or Kelly’s violin, and join in singing timeless lyrics, *Joy to the World the Lord has Come!*

*Let awe infuse our hearts EVERY day with vivid joy as we remember His birth! Help us to find peace as we struggle to grasp the magnitude of your devotion, and let our lives resonate with the wonder of your love. Amen.*

—Susan Horton

“I SAID to myself, “This is it. I’m finished. God is a lost cause”  
—Lamentations 3:18 (The Message translation)

**I** REALIZE LAMENTATIONS ISN’T A STANDARD ADVENT SCRIPTURE. CHRISTMAS CARDS DEPICTING SOFT-FOCUSED MANGER SCENES RARELY choose verses like “[God] turned me into a scarecrow of skin and bones, then broke the bones” (verse 4). Or “You wrapped yourself in thick blankets of clouds so no prayers could get through” (verse 44). Or “I said to myself, “This is it. I’m finished. God is a lost cause” (verse 18).

Lamentations records the hurt and despair of a people who feel God has abandoned them. The speaker (perhaps Jeremiah, perhaps one or more anonymous prophets) writes from the experience of personal and national catastrophe. Israel stands defeated, its power annihilated, and its people forced into foreign exile. From the speaker’s perspective, God alternately instigates the suffering or, worse, simply refuses to appear. This is the stuff of Lent, not Advent. It’s the shrouded midnight of Golgotha, not the starlit evening of Bethlehem.

Yet darkness haunts the edges of the Christmas story. The joyful scenes in the stable play out against a backdrop of anxiety—*Will my fiancé stay with me? Will I be outcast? Will we find shelter? Will we survive?* I wonder, sometimes, how it must have been for Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and all the others in the tale the weeks after Gabriel’s visit, in the months between the divine messages of “fear not,” or in the years subsequent to seeing the heavenly host. When we look back on—or forward to—times where God feels especially close, especially with us, the rest of life can seem awfully lonely.

Grim as it is, I hold on to Lamentations as a check against the



(continued)

Monday, December 12, 2011

*O come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer  
Our spirits by thy justice here;  
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,  
And death's dark shadows put to flight.  
Rejoice! Rejoice!  
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.*

I HAVE SUNG IN CHOIRS ALL MY LIFE AND ALWAYS LOOK FORWARD TO THE MUSIC OF THE ADVENT SEASON. MANY ARE ANXIOUS TO move more quickly to the traditional Christmas melodies we all enjoy and cherish, but over the years I have come to love the music of Advent more deeply. One of my favorite hymns of the season is *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*, a hymn rooted in the ancient “O Antiphons” of the 8th and 9th century. The musical setting that we use today came much later, but even so, it’s from the 15th century. I’m sure that I have sung this hymn every year that I can remember and each time I sing it, I can’t help but feel an awe-inspiring connection to the past and to the future. It’s humbling. Like so many of the hymns and anthems of the season, it has been sung for hundreds of years and will continue to be sung for hundreds more. The tradition of Advent music is one of the most powerful ways to express our profound yearning for the long-expected Savior.

*O Emmanuel  
O God is with us*

—Ed Dodd

Friday, December 9, 2011

*There’s a darkness upon me that’s flooded in light... “head full of doubt/road full of promises” — The Avett Brothers*

“THE LIGHT shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it...The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” —John 1:5;9 (NRSV)

AS DARKNESS DESCENDS UPON THE PHYSICAL REALM, WE ENTER A SEASON OF ADVENT, A TIME OF PREPARATION, A TIME OF hopefulness in which we are reminded that God came dwelling among God’s people. Flooding the darkness with light, God in the Christ Child took up residence here with us offering grace and hope illuminating life and freeing Creation from the grips of death.

*Holy one, who dwells among us, send your Spirit preparing our hearts to be illuminated by your Son. May this season be a time of reflection upon your light flooding the darkness, calling us to partner in your restorative work in Christ.*

—Drew Sutton  
Director, Wesley Foundation

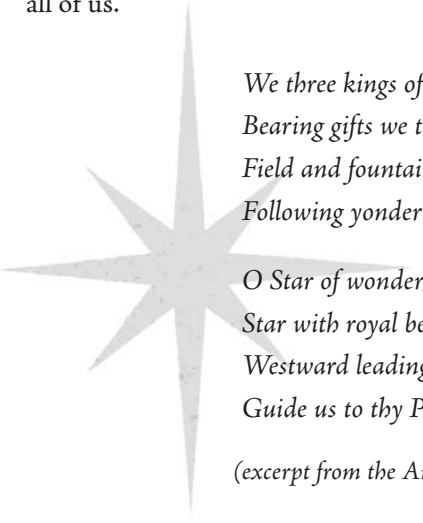


“MAY all kings fall down before him” —Psalms 72:11

IT HAS BECOME THE TRADITION OF THE 4TH AND 5TH GRADE SUNDAY SCHOOL CLASS TO BE ONE OF EXPLORATION WITH LOTS OF QUESTIONS and answering in an open and accommodating setting.

The questions are not always of your typical variety and the answers are sometimes, “hey, let’s go outside and play.” When I asked the group what they do to prepare for Advent, I received a variety of fascinating responses. Singing Christmas carols and making ornaments for their tree was popular. One said, “Baking cookies to give as gifts for friends and family.” Another said their family is involved in “providing gifts for the less fortunate.” Finally, everyone admitted that traveling to see family was a very common tradition and important in each of their families.

This exchange of ideas reminded all of us of Matthew’s account of the three kings. We saw the parallels between the account in scripture and our own traditions. All of us travel to friends and family, usually bringing gifts. It really did help make this season a little more meaningful and relevant to all of us.



*We three kings of Orient are  
Bearing gifts we traverse afar  
Field and fountain, moor and mountain  
Following yonder star*

*O Star of wonder, star of night  
Star with royal beauty bright  
Westward leading, still proceeding  
Guide us to thy Perfect Light*

*(excerpt from the American carol “We Three Kings of Orient Are”  
by Rev. John Henry Hopkins, 1857)*

—Stewart Craig and the  
4th & 5th Grade Sunday School

“BRETHREN, I count not myself to have apprehended; but this one thing I do forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before. I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.”

—Philippians 3:13-14

FOR THE LAST FOURTEEN YEARS I HAVE LIVED, USING THIS VERSE TO STRENGTHEN ME. MY MOTHER PRAYED NON-STOP FOR ME FOR 56 years, and then GOD moved into my life. I am being transformed into the image of His Son Jesus Christ. I have left the wilderness behind me and I am learning how to be a child of God.

Remember, never give up and never stop praying. The following ten points have helped to guide me:

1. Do not take your eyes off your goal. *The goal of knowing Christ and being transformed into his image.*
2. Train like an athlete. *Put aside anything and everything that takes your focus off of your goal.*
3. Forget the past. *Christ has taken that and covered it with his blood. It no longer exists. Forgive everyone.*
4. Lean into Christ. *He is able to carry you through anything.*
5. Press on. *Do this in the power of the Holy Spirit, not your own.*
6. Trust and obey. *When we become one with Him by surrendering all of self, we begin to experience the power.*
7. Remember, Christ will hold your hand. *He will give you strength.*
8. Humble yourself. *He is the God who created the universe and He loves you.*
9. Expect miracles. *Pray, knowing that he will show Himself mighty.*
10. Praise Him in the morning!  
Honor Him at noon!  
Thirst for Him in the afternoon!  
Revere Him in the night!

*This life is a gift and a love story being written daily by the hand of God.*

Merry Christmas  
—Dana Kinard