

A wooden house-shaped ornament with a red bead and a pine branch on a blue background.

ADVENT

devotional

2023



DUNWOODY
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 3

The Short and the Long of It

By Sid Linton

"To everything there is a season, A time for every purpose under heaven."

ECCLESIASTES 3:1

Welcome to the shortest Season of Advent we'll have until 2028. Last year was the longest we'll have until 2033.

For us Protestants the starting day of Advent is always a Sunday, the fourth Sunday before Christmas, and often, but not this year, the weekend of our American Thanksgiving.

Advent ends on Christmas Eve so it always includes four Sundays. But because Christmas Eve can fall on any day of the week, the number of days in Advent varies. When Christmas Eve is on a Sunday, as it is this year, Advent is a short 22 days. When Christmas Eve is a Saturday, Advent is a long 28 days.

By contrast, Lent - again for us Protestants - is always the same number of days starting on Ash Wednesday and ending on Holy Saturday. Yet, the date of Ash Wednesday slips back and forth on our calendar as the date of the spring full moon determines the date of Easter.

Does it matter? Are our liturgical seasons all that important?

It does matter. And, yes, they are important.

Our liturgical seasons are the timekeepers of our living faith in the God who created time itself and our faith in His Son who, through His Church, commands us to observe important rituals regularly. Think of the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter and the acts of Communion and Sunday worship as recurrent training. Imagine your faith life for a whole year without those beautiful reminders and the guidance, channeling even, they provide. It's good that we take them for granted because it shows that the seasons are embedded in our routines. We don't, and shouldn't, dismiss them as unimportant.

For clarity, our Protestant Advent - a time to prepare for the coming of Christ - started in the 400s and has varied in name and practice over the places and times and in the faiths that have observed it. It's pretty straightforward for us today, but don't be confused if you see your Catholic or Orthodox friends observing this wonderful season a bit earlier, longer or differently. The meaning of it is the same - prepare for the coming of Christ.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, Thank you for your gift of time. And thank you for the timely events your Church offers to us to perpetuate and enhance our faith. Amen.

Today's Thought

Let's share our Advent joyously with others so they, too, will be reminded.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 4
Today we share two devotions about "home."

Providing Hope to Homes for the Holidays

By Owen Bouton

"Be happy in your hope, stand your ground when you're in trouble, and devote yourselves to prayer."

ROMANS 12:12

One of the many things I love most about DUMC and the larger Dunwoody community is the charitable opportunities that abound. Whether it's serving lunch downtown for Trinity Table, building a diaper wall for the CAC, dancing the night away at A Night to Shine, building a house for Habitat for Humanity, traveling to Guatemala on a mission trip or any of the other numerous giving options out there, it's a blessing to be able to reach out and help those in need at the local and global level.

Over the past several years, our Sunday School class, Halftime, has participated in CAC's annual Christmas gift program to "adopt" a child and provide desired presents for their family to open over the holidays. Our participation has grown every year – we're hoping to serve over 40 children this year. It's our small way of providing hope to homes for the holidays and our children participate in the shopping, which helps sow seeds of a giving heart at an early age.

Prayer

Dear Lord, Thank you for all the many blessings you have bestowed upon us. Help us to use those blessings to enrich others in need and provide hope throughout our community. In your son's name we pray, Amen.

Today's Thought

If you're interested in getting involved in a charitable way, there are so many places that you can plug into – check out the Serve tab on DUMC's website (www.dunwoodyumc.org). It's a great way to meet people and provide hope inside and outside the community

Holiday Memories

By Teresa Dietz

*"By wisdom a house is built, and through understanding it is established;
through knowledge its rooms are filled with rare and beautiful treasures."*

PROVERBS 24:3-4

There's no place like home for the holidays, or so the saying goes,
Visions of happy times surrounded by family and friends,
The scent of turkey and baking cookies wafting in the air,

A fresh cut pine twinkling with millions of lights,
And the anticipation of presents given and received.
A picture-perfect memory to be savored and recalled for years to come.

But home for the holidays memories are not always happy ones,
Children separated by parents who haven't been able to reconcile their differences,
Families who don't have a roof over their head or money to spend,
Who must rely on outside help or go without a tree, presents or food.
Such memories are best forgotten in hope there will be a better year to come.

Whatever your holiday memories may be, warm and magical, or bleak and painful, let's not lose our focus on what this holiday is really about – love, acceptance and joy for the coming of the Baby Jesus.

If your memories of home for the holidays are good ones, enjoy and treasure them and be thankful. If your memories of home for the holidays are not so good, think of others who might be experiencing the same thing. How can you help them and make things better? A small gesture of kindness and thoughtfulness may make a world of difference to someone who is struggling.

Regardless of whether your memories are good or not so good, if you know someone personally who needs help then find a way to help. Or, find an organization that helps folks in need and lend or hand or donate goods or money. Don't put it off thinking maybe you'll do it another year. The person who really needs help needs it today, and maybe you can be the one who helps make their home for the holidays memories brighter this year.

Prayer

Dear God, Help me be aware of those around me who need a helping hand and help motivate me to do whatever I can to make their holidays a little better. Amen.

Today's Thought

Go to the Community Assistance Center (CAC) website (<https://ourcac.org/>) and find a way to help.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 5

Treasure

By Amber Rowe

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

MATTHEW 6:19-21

Our one-year-old daughter is at the stage where she believes that anything she can hold belongs to her. Whether it's a doll, rock or snack, the object becomes a highly valued treasure. Try to take it away, and you might experience very loud protesting!

As we grow, our perception of what holds value changes. However, our response to losing treasure or not receiving the treasure we desire is often similar to that of a toddler – protest! Jesus taught his followers not to store up treasures for themselves on earth. He wanted them to remember that everything on earth is temporary.

At Christmas, we celebrate Jesus coming to earth in the form of a human baby. However, Jesus did not begin his existence when he was born in the manger. Jesus was with God at creation (John 1:1-2). Unlike the things of the world, Jesus has always been and will always be. Jesus came to earth to demonstrate God's love for the world and to save the world. As the gospel of John reminds us, *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life”* (John 3:16).

The world tempts us to focus on fleeting treasures and pleasures. God wants our hearts to be focused on heavenly treasure. He invites us to experience the hope, peace, joy and love found only in Jesus Christ while we are living on this earth, and he wants us to spend eternity with him.

Prayer

Loving Father, Thank you for the gift of your Son, Jesus. We confess that we often look to the things of this world to give us satisfaction. Please forgive us. Help us to turn our hearts toward you and seek the treasure only you can provide. In Jesus's name we pray, Amen.

Today's Thought

What is your greatest treasure and where is it stored?

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 6
Today we share two devotions about "home."

Practice Hospitality

By Linda Miller

"Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality."

ROMANS 12:13

My niece and her family live out of state. One year things just did not fall into place for us to get together during the holidays.

When my next-door neighbors learned that I would be alone, they invited me to share Christmas dinner with them. That simple act of kindness and hospitality was the beginning of a wonderful friendship that has continued even years after they moved away. We consider ourselves "friends who are family."

When I think of "No Place Like Home," I not only think of my own family but also of my friends who one Christmas were my "home for the holiday" and "sunshine of a friendly gaze."

Prayer

Oh Lord, We give thanks for those who bring sunshine to others not only at Christmas but all year through. We ask that you continue to help us look for opportunities to practice hospitality and help us strive to be a blessing to all who we meet and in all that we do. Amen.

Today's Thought

As we approach this holiday season, may we look for opportunities to be the sunshine of a friendly gaze in our words and deeds.

Where Is Home?

By Becky Springer

"My people will live in peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, in undisturbed places of rest."

ISAIAH 32:18

They say that "home is where the heart is," and I think that nothing could be more true. It doesn't matter where we live or how many things we have, it's the people that fill our lives and hearts that are most important.

When I was a freshman in college, my mom re-married and moved from Houston to San Antonio. By the time our holiday break arrived, I realized that I no longer had a "home" to go to for Christmas. I sadly drove to the address my mother gave me and walked into the house. There, I found the tree decorated exactly as it had been my whole life, all my favorite cookies and treats, my brother sitting in front of the television watching *It's a Wonderful Life*, and everything set up like our former space. It was then that I realized, it wasn't where we lived, it was the place with the people we love that defines a home.

I hope that every one of you gets to rest and spend time with the ones you love this holiday season.

Prayer

Loving God, As we go through this Advent season, help us to see the love, joy, peace and hope that you have given us. Guide us to share those precious gifts with others. Amen.

Today's Thought

Take a moment to remember and pray for those in Gaza and the Middle East who have lost their peaceful dwelling spaces and their loved ones.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 7

HOPE – Alert! Jesus Is Coming

By Kathryn Riddles

“Therefore, be on the alert - for you do not know when the Master of the house is coming. Whether in the evening, or at midnight, at cockcrowing, or in the morning - lest He come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all. Be on the alert!”

MARK 13:35-37

How will you respond to Christ's return? I feel that some of my responses might be “Oh Lord, you're early!” or “Just tomorrow I was going to begin a new plan of reading the Scriptures and set aside a special time for prayer” or “You've come just as I was beginning to decorate my house for Christmas, and I have all these packages to wrap!” or “It's just so hard to change my busy schedule right now!” or “If only I had more time, Lord.”

Think about this. Few individuals at the end of their lives wish they had spent more time at their office, shopping online or running carpool duty. We fill our days with such busy body tasks. Most tend to regret that they did not spend more time on eternal concerns - the things of God: Spending time in prayer, becoming a better parent, reaching out to those in need through service, putting others first with love and words of encouragement - in other words, doing the will of God in a chaotic world.

Someday, we will see Christ and give an account for how we have lived our lives. We will be accountable for the choices we have made. As my former Bible study teacher, Beth Moore, often said, “ Each day we live is one day closer to the return of Christ.” Let us be not surprised with dismay and regret, but hopefully eager and ready for His return. During this season of Holy anticipation - Come, Lord Jesus, Come!

Prayer

Lord, I do not want to be ashamed when I see you. Help me to live each day as if it were my last. Teach me perseverance for studying your word and keep me alert to live in the light of your presence. During this season of Hope, Love, and Joy, keep my focus clear of empty distractions of anything that keeps me from you. Amen.

Today's Thought

What are significant ways in which I can renew my perspective on external things?

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 8

True Essence of the Season

By Elvin Aycock

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."

MICAH 5:2

As we prepare our homes for the holidays, let's remember to prepare a space in our hearts for the Prince of Peace. Amidst the rush of shopping, cooking and decorating, let's take a moment each day to bask in the quiet and soak in the peace that comes through Christ.

Let us remember that the heart of Advent lies in quiet reflection of the coming of Jesus Christ. It's acknowledging that the perfect home is not about well-decorated rooms or a table laden with feasts but rather it is within us, where love, peace, joy and hope reside.

The fabulous feasts will be forgotten, the gifts will lose their newness and the decorations will be packed away. However, the transformation our hearts undergo through Advent will stay with us forever.

As we decorate our physical homes this season, let us not forget to also furnish our spiritual homes with hope, love and divine joy. As we light the candles on the Advent wreath, let our heart home be filled with the light of Christ's love. This Advent season, let us help create a world where everyone can indeed be "Home for the Holidays."

Prayer

God of hope, peace, joy and love, As we journey together through this Advent season, help us find quiet moments amidst the noise to hear Your voice. Keep us grounded in your love and kindness. Bless our hearts with the peace of the season, the joy that fills our homes, the love that binds us together, and the hope that lights the way through dark times. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

Today's Thought

The Advent season brings with it the traditions of the holidays, the warmth of home, the aroma of baking cookies, the twinkling lights of the Christmas tree and the joyous carols. Let us not forget that the true essence of the season is the anticipation of the birth of Christ.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 9

Turn to the Father

By Judith Rowe

"Moses answered the people, 'Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.'" (vv.13-14)

EXODUS 14:1-15

As we conclude this week's Advent theme of "Peace in the Midst of Turmoil," I think about Moses. In our lives, we have moments that are trying and lead us to turn to our heavenly Father! Moses asks, "Who are you?" God responds, "I am who I am!"

May this be our moment to turn to the divine for help and guidance. In the quiet moments, we can all find a peace and serenity as we allow the wisdom of the divine to guide us.

Prayer

Loving God, May we find peace this Advent season and in all our days ahead as we seek you. Help us to listen to your wisdom and accept your guidance. Grant us peace from above. Amen.

Today's Thought

We are one with the Holy Spirit! Yes, we can go forward to his grace and love!

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 10

More Than a Gift

By Kristin Eaton

“Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up.”

ECCLESIASTES 4:9-10

Ask my sister or me what our favorite childhood Christmas memory is, and I would stake my next paycheck that we'd answer the same. Barbie Dream House! When we were little, Santa dropped down the chimney the 1979 version – A-frame with yellow floors, orange shingles and huge skylights for easy access.

Megan and I played with it for hours, days, with friends and family alike. We moved often as kids, and as we zigzagged across the country, the Dream House was an anchor. Eventually, we outgrew it, and the house was passed down to mom's friend's daughters. For a half second, I thought about calling the girls and charging them with taking great care of it.

I know (I know!) Christmas isn't about the gifts. But sometimes we find that one present that's valued for years, bringing friends and family together, fostering memories that last a lifetime. The present doesn't have to be expensive, just thoughtful. My current favorite was made by my niece Madeline. It's a small painting reminding me to “Be Happy.”

Prayer

Lord, Thank you for friends and family to make lasting memories with. Let us open our hearts and homes to welcome them and let them know they are loved. Amen.

Today's Thought

God gave us the best gift of all – Jesus!

MONDAY, DECEMBER 11

Waiting and Waiting

By Randy Pilkenton

“Being glad in hope, quiet in trouble, at all times given to prayer.”

ROMANS 12:12

Many devotionals have been written during Advent about waiting. Probably one (or more!) by me, although I don't really remember for sure.

Waiting seems to be on my mind this Advent season. I'm getting older (if you didn't notice, thank you) and in some ways, with my waiting, I'm more patient and in other ways more impatient. The latter is often wrapped up in hopes, dreams or needs that have seemingly gone unmet.

None of us is alone in having these feelings. Not now, and certainly not alone relative to those who came before us. I tried to look up how long the people of the Old Testament waited between a promise of a Messiah (variously: the anointed one, the deliverer, a savior), and the birth of Jesus. Seems the estimates are between 1,300 and 3,700 years! That's a big range! Regardless, let's agree that it was a loooooong time to wait.

What did God's people do while they waited? Well, for one, they prayed and encouraged one another:

David prayed: *“Finish what you started in me, God. Your love is eternal - don't quit on me now.”* Psalm 138:8 (The Message)

“But those who are waiting for the Lord will have new strength; they will get wings like eagles: running, they will not be tired, and walking, they will have no weariness.” Isaiah 40:31 (Bible in Basic English)

“But blessed are those who trust in the LORD and have made the LORD their hope and confidence. They are like trees planted along a riverbank, with roots that reach deep into the water. Such trees are not bothered by the heat or worried by long months of drought. Their leaves stay green, and they never stop producing fruit.” Jeremiah 17:7-8 (New Living Translation)

Through those long years of waiting, many trying, desperate and sometimes dangerous circumstances were faced and endured. Quite often the people would turn away from God when they arrogantly said to themselves “We got this,” and then turn to God when it was clear they didn't have it. Throughout, God never abandoned them. He was always there. It's just that sometimes the people were too busy or scared to notice.

Sounds like how we can be today, no?

I am reminded of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, as an example for us this Advent and all seasons when we are waiting and hoping for prayers to be answered, circumstances to improve, the world to be at peace and the joy of Jesus Christ's birth and the gift of his crucifixion to fill all of our hearts and minds.

Zechariah was a devout follower of God, a priest and a descendant of Aaron. He believed in the promise of a Messiah and the deliverance of the Jewish people. He was probably well aware that his waiting had been preceded by hundreds of generations but he never lost hope and maintained his faith.

Zechariah knew that God can work in our lives despite any circumstance. Things may look hopeless, and history may give us strong support for feeling hopeless. But God is always in control. Zechariah knew that it was going to be through God, rather than through ourselves, that God's promises would be fulfilled.

As Jesus taught another 30 years or so later: "All things are possible with God." (Mark 10:27)

Waiting, patiently, is a part of life.

Prayer

Father God, Waiting is no fun, not what we want to do, and we wish our waiting would end and that our hopes and needs are immediately fulfilled. When we feel this way help us to remember the prayers and words of David, Isaiah, Jeremiah and the example of Zechariah. Let their words and examples give us faith, strength and peace while we wait. Amen.

Today's Thought

Belief in God, maker of heaven and earth, and his Son, Jesus Christ, as our savior and redeemer, will get you through it. And, make your waiting well worth it.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 12

Joy Mixed with Grief

By Anne Reich

"The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit."

PSALM 34:18

I absolutely love Christmas. So much so that if I were on the TLC show "My Strange Addiction," it would be that I'd secretly like to have my house decorated for Christmas all year long! I love the decorations, the lights, the smells, the food (can I get an Amen?) and how everyone just seems to be happier. My youngest son was even born on Christmas, so we have a bonanza of a day from morning 'til night!!

So four years ago when my dad passed away, the first Christmas without him was hard. I realized firsthand how such a special holiday can also be an extremely difficult holiday. And this year, like Dr. Phil, I lost my mom, so I'm approaching Christmas with trepidation. I'm comforted knowing my parents are reunited in heaven, and by passages like Psalm 34:18: *The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.*

This Christmas Day I'm going to be joyful and relish watching my kids open presents. But I'm also going to take time to be sad and experience grief. Grief is a process and you have to endure it so you can get through it. I'll also be praying for Dr. Phil and his family, for everyone who is on a journey like mine and for all souls who are brokenhearted or crushed in spirit. I hope you join me.

Prayer

Dear Lord, Thank you for giving me amazing parents who I loved so much. Grief is the price of love, and I pray that this Christmas I can sit in my grief, while also experiencing the joy of the true meaning of Christmas. And most importantly, thank you for Jesus. Amen.

Today's Thought

Who do you know personally who experienced a loss this year and may need your prayers?

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 13

Peace as I Ponder

By Gale Owen

“But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.”

LUKE 2:19

Once I decided I was going to write on Luke 2:19, I heard the word “ponder” everywhere. Does that kind of thing ever happen to you? You buy a new car and then you start seeing those cars at every turn! The more it happens, the more I ponder...

A few weeks ago I attended a funeral of a childhood friend. Denny’s parents and my parents were best friends, so I have fond memories of them through the years. As I walked into the church, I was greeted by one of his older sisters. Recent years had changed our memories of each other but when I told her my name, she immediately grabbed me in an embrace reserved for family. She called her other siblings over and though our reunion was brief, it was so heartwarming.

There is something about being around people who have known you your whole life. There is a comfort about it – like being home. I came away from the service with a feeling of peace for seeing these dear people and celebrating the blessing of knowing Denny. I will ponder this in my heart forever.

Prayer

Gracious God, Thank you for the example of Mary and the lesson of holding dear memories close. Amen.

Today’s Thought

This Advent take time to reflect on the loved ones you carry in your heart.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 14

Feeling True Love and Joy

By Bob and Joyce Burnett

“Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.’”

MATTHEW 19:14

We were privileged to travel to a small community in Kenya a combined total of 11 times. On our first trip, we expected to bless and teach these children who had nothing by our standards. However, we quickly learned that we would be led by the children.

The beautiful smiles were contagious. There was always a group of children around us showering us with unconditional love. We watched and listened as they joyfully sang and spoke of Jesus as a friend and companion.

On each subsequent trip, we would be “welcomed home” with words and true love and joy by these seemingly poor children. It was apparent that they were rich in what mattered.

As we ponder the Advent season, we want to recapture the feeling of love and joy that we felt in that place. It was certainly another home to us. We learned that home can be anywhere we are as long as we have the love and joy of our Lord.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, Help us to remember this Advent time that we can be home anywhere we are as long as You are with us. Thank you for the lessons learned from children. Amen.

Today's Thought

Embrace those around you with love and joy today and every day.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 15

See Our Great Hope

By Jonathan Goode

"The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent."

EXODUS 14:14

We love to respond to challenges with action. It gives us a sense of control and makes us feel responsible. But the scriptures constantly call God's people to stillness and godward trust.

This Advent season you might be feeling great. If that is you, praise God! It is so gracious of God to give us uplifting seasons. This devotion, however, is written for those who might be struggling. Things did not go as planned, loved ones left, relationships collapsed or your felt sense of security has been brought into question.

We are reminded of our deep neediness during Advent. But as we walk through this season, we also look beyond our struggles to see our great hope: Jesus Christ. This world is tough! We should not ignore that. Jesus has overcome the world and, in following Him, we really can become more *"unshakable and assured, deeply at peace."* (John 16:32, The Message)

Get alone with Jesus today. Sit still with Him. Ask Him to bring to you the peace that He promised. Don't stop asking until He does. Our God is with you... and He will always keep His word.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, Grant me peace! As I look forward to the coming of your son, help me to feel internally the peace that He brings. Help me to trust Him supremely even in the midst of my challenges. Empower me through your Holy Spirit and help me be alert to the moments where I am tempted to not trust you. Help me keep my eyes fixed on Jesus. Please help me, God. Amen.

Today's Thought

Be still, and know that I am God. (Psalms 46:10)

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 16

The Best Quarter Ever

By Diane Morgan

“And the angel said unto them, ‘Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.’”

LUKE 2:10-11

It was Thanksgiving in the late 1950s. Our family of six shared around the table what we were thankful for. We talked about the upcoming Christmas Season and, of course, my siblings and I shared what we wanted Santa to bring us on December 24.

My Dad then challenged my brother and me to a task, saying that whoever accomplished this task by Christmas Eve would earn twenty-five cents as his or her reward. A quarter! The task was to memorize the Christmas Story from Luke 2:1-20.

I have never been good at memorizing things, but I accepted the challenge and began the task. *And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.* For weeks I worked to be able to recite it from memory. When I thought I was ready, I went to Dad to recite. I stumbled through it, needing a few prompts from Dad, through whose grace, I earned my reward.

With the money burning a hole in my pocket, soon after receiving it, I trudged through Minnesota snow to “The Dime Store” (maybe Woolworths) to search for whatever a quarter would buy. And I found the perfect thing!

I found the most beautiful ornament I had ever seen. It was dark blue with gold and white images around the circumference depicting the scene in Bethlehem. It was the size of a grapefruit. I carefully took it to the sales lady who took my quarter and gave me my change. (It was the 50s!).

No sooner than I had left the store, I dropped the bag and shattered my precious ornament. Heartbroken, I went back to the store. The sales lady saw my grief and helped me in a memorable way. We found another ornament, similar, but smaller. It was pink and blue with a similar Bethlehem scene around the middle, AND, it was plastic! She gave it to me, not accepting the small amount of change I had left.

I got that ornament home safely and proudly hung it on our tree. Every year since then, whether in my parents’ home or my own, I have hung that ornament on a tree remembering the precious scripture I learned, the grace of my Dad to help me and the kindness of the sales lady. If someone else hangs it, I re-hang it!

The Babe will always be wrapped in swaddling clothes, not bands of cloth, and I will always try to figure out what Mary pondered in her heart, but in my heart, I will always be thankful for the gift of faith and love my Father instilled in me as I journey through my life of faith. That quarter was priceless.

Prayer

Oh, Magnificent Father, You give us more than we could ever deserve. Nothing we could ever do could turn Your love away from us. You came to earth and put on flesh to rescue us from sin and death. Jesus, whose birth we celebrate, was the greatest gift of all. I thank you for the gift of my earthly father who loved me enough to inspire me to learn and understand the greatest story ever told. Through Christ I pray. Amen.

Today’s Thought

Give someone a priceless gift today. Pick from hope, peace, joy and love.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 17

God's Family

By Andy Drexler

"The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.'"

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. (Luke 1:28-30)"

LUKE 1:28-30; 39-43 / MATTHEW 28:8-10

Greetings are a huge part of our faith. When the angel came to Mary and said "Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!", she was confused and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. When Mary went to visit Elizabeth, her unborn child leaped within her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, said "Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" As Mary Magdalene and the other Mary ran from the tomb on the first Easter morning, Jesus greeted them saying "Don't be afraid. Go and tell my brothers that I am going to Galilee. They will see me there."

Oowwee!

This is the greeting Charles Mully, founder of Mully Children's Family (MCF), gives to abandoned street children in the slums of Kenya. It means "Peace be to you." I don't know what these kids think about his greeting, but I suspect it gives them hope and peace. Enough hope and peace that over 26,000 children have chosen to walk out of the slum, into his arms, and be adopted into his family. To start a new life as a son or daughter of "Daddy Mully."

I last heard this greeting when we went to MCF in 2019. All the kids there know it and often repeat it. I'm looking forward to hearing it again in April 2024 when we next visit MCF because this greeting, and the transformed lives of the kids at MCF, is love in action and pure encouragement! Words can't describe what we saw and heard at MCF – the only way you can understand is to go and see it.

You may not think we have much in common with the kids at MCF, but we do. Until Jesus came into the world on the first Christmas, we were lost and without hope. Then Jesus came, called us and adopted us. Now we're part of His family, children of God, fellow heirs with Christ (Romans 8:17) and looking forward to a glorious inheritance (Ephesians 1:11).

How will Jesus greet us when we meet Him face to face? He might say "Don't be afraid." Or maybe "Well done, good and faithful servant." But, He could say "Oowwee!"

Prayer

Blessed are You, Lord God, King of the Universe, who loves us and adopts us and fills us with compassion for lost and abandoned children and those who save and serve them. Grant that these abandoned children, whom no one loves, will find an earthly father who loves them, a family that will care for them, and most of all, Your Son, Jesus Christ. Grant that we will be part of their adoption story. Amen.

Today's Thought

Consider coming to MCF with us next April.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 18

The First Christmas Gift

By Jerry Sanders

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”*

JOHN 3:16

Recently, my wife Sandra and I found ourselves without internet, TV or telephone landline (yes, we still have one). We had nothing to distract and fill our time from Saturday afternoon until late Tuesday afternoon. So, as we usually do with our Sunday School lesson, we found a book to read aloud together. The book was *The Christmas Box* by Richard Paul Evans. The book had been a Christmas present to Sandra from our oldest daughter Ashley 11 years earlier.

The story is of a young married couple who recently graduated from college and moved with their new daughter to a smaller city to start their life together. They had moved to the particular city because it offered a business opportunity that required investment of their savings as well as a commitment of considerable time. They settled into a one-bedroom apartment that quickly revealed how confining their quarters were. Soon they happened upon an advertisement for accommodations with a widow in her spacious home in exchange for some duties around the home. After an interview, they were accepted by the widow. The story goes on to tell how the daddy found a beautiful Christmas box in the attic that contained letters and how he explored their meaning. I will not divulge much more of what all took place in case you may wish to read the rest of the story.

Nevertheless, as the story unveiled, the daddy in the story found himself devoting considerable time to the new business venture to make it successful. Such efforts, though, also took time away from his daughter. Along the way, the widow in the house had become quite attached and fond of the little girl. The family and widow spent considerable time together and engaged in conversations on various topics including Christmas. On one occasion, the widow asked the dad if he knew what the first Christmas present was. He struggled and thought and considered several possible answers including such items as gold, frankincense and myrrh. But somehow those answers did not seem exactly right.

The book cover of *The Christmas Box* reveals the answer to the widow's question about the first Christmas present. On the cover, the author states that he hopes the message of the book "...will endure as a reminder of the sanctity and holiness of a parent's love." Isn't that what God, the Father, gave to us at Christmas? He loves us so much that He gave us His only Son. The gift of love. There is no greater gift.

Prayer

Father, We thank you for so many gifts in our lives each and every day. May we always remember the gift of love that You gave to us at Christmas. Help us to demonstrate and share the love that You shared with us. Amen.

Today's Thought

May each Christmas gift you give and receive be filled with love and happiness.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 19

Gratitude

By Robert Stovall

“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-18

Showing gratitude does not come naturally for me.

I tend to take the good with the bad and press forward. At times that can be okay, but for the most part, it is not a recipe for improving relationships. I have come to recognize this in myself and have been working on it.

Every time I reflect on something that I am or should be grateful for, I am reminded of the trip our church took to Kenya to visit Mully Children’s Family in 2019. We were fortunate to be able to deliver meals from Food Stock to kids in school as well as to local families in the area.

One such delivery was to a family that lived in a small one-room hut. As Americans with much, we might think this family had very little. In addition to the small hut, they had one cow that was tied up nearby. What got to me was the reaction of the mother of the family. As we gave her the food, she could not stop proclaiming how blessed she and her family were.

She was so thankful to God for all her family had. It was a moment I will never forget and an excellent reminder that we don’t need things to be blessed.

Prayer

Dear God, Thank you for all our blessings and your amazing work in our lives. Remind us that we have been given so much and to give back at every opportunity. Amen.

Today’s Thought

In the words of Andy Stanley, “Gratitude is the language of the heart.”

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 20

Be a Shepherd

By Joy Culbreth

“And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.” (v.8-14)

LUKE 2:1-20

This past spring I traveled with our ministers, several DUMC members and friends to the Holy Land. We traveled in the eastern part of Beit Sahur. There is a red-domed Greek Orthodox church at a site known as Kaniset el-Ruat (Church of the Shepherds). This site is identified with the biblical Tower of Edar (Tower of the Flock) where Jacob settled after his wife Rachel died.

While deciding on an Advent devotional to submit, I researched some contributions of Christian Church fathers in the area. One, Eusebius of Caesarea (c.260-339), is regarded as the father of Church history. His Church History is the principal primary source on the rise of Christianity during its first three centuries. Others wrote that the Tower of Edar was 1,000 paces from Bethlehem and marked the place where the shepherds received the angel's message for the Messiah's birth.

For me, one of the most holy and impressive sites we visited was this site, Shepherd's Field. Our ministers told us that caves were located near as shepherds "kept watch over their flock" and are still in the area east of Bethlehem.

The Gospel of Luke tells us an angel announced the birth of Jesus. The angel's good news was not given to the noble or pious but to workers with a low reputation. Jewish literature ranked "shepherd" as among the most despised occupations of the time — but Jesus was to identify himself with this occupation when he called himself "the Good Shepherd" (John 10:11). I recalled standing closer to the edge from the covered area where we were given Holy Communion and looking up from the bottom of the hill with the group. I looked up at the beautiful blue sky while trying to imagine the night sky starry and shining bright as the angels announced the birth of our Messiah.

My late husband, Jack, and I memorized the Christmas passage (Luke 2:1-20) as children in Sunday School and recalled watching Charlie Brown Christmas with our daughters as Linus recited the announcement. Can't you just hear it? (Luke 2:8-10)

Now, fast forward to today. There are so many within and without church who need to hear that same Good News message of the angels and then share and spread the Good News Jesus spoke of in John 8:12. You and I are those "shepherds" who can share and reach others who need to see and hear the Good News during this Advent season and every season. (Isaiah 6: 8). Amen goes here!

Prayer

Loving God, Open our eyes to new opportunities to be a shepherd. Open our mouths to share your word. Open our hearts to love the way your would have us love. Amen

Today's Thought

How can you spread the Good News today and every day?

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 21

Coming Home

By Sally Murphy

“Heal me, O LORD, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved: for thou art my praise.”

JEREMIAH 17:14

This summer I faced a challenging health situation. To facilitate the best prognosis, I decided to seek medical care in a hospital thousands of kilometers from home. I deliberated about whether it was even practical to make this choice. How could I travel so far away and leave my loved ones behind, in particular my mother, who has struggled with her own medical stability? Who would provide care for my three cats who have helped provide support and enrichment to my life?

But what would happen if I did not take care of my body- if I continued to decline and later faced even graver choices or challenges? Ultimately, I took a deep breath and reached out to Reverend Kathy Brockman for help. She immediately sent out an “SOS” to the LIFT Sunday School class, and my dear friends came to my aid.

Ann and Lynda helped facilitate cat support, which for me was such an amazing gift. Although I have a pet sitter who provides for the needs of my furry friends, knowing that Teddy, Luna and Bruce were receiving extra doses of true TLC meant more than I can adequately express. Members of the Sunday School class sent letter after letter, prayer after prayer while I was in the hospital in Denver.

On one of my darkest days, after receiving news that my heart was not healing as the doctors had hoped, I came back from physical therapy to find the most beautiful bouquet of flowers from the LIFT class. I am not typically an emotional person, but in that moment I almost burst into tears. The prayers and outpouring of love that continued until I was finally discharged were unbelievable. The relief I felt from leaving the confines of a lonely, isolated sterile room felt like a massive weight had been lifted from my heart. The gratitude I felt for the church and my amazing friends in the LIFT class was immeasurable. I had no idea how I would ever adequately express my love for these women. When I walked into my home and found another stunning bouquet of flowers, I felt true gratitude for God’s grace.

When I prayed for healing and guidance, God was there for me. He provided me with love and support in ways I could have never imagined. Medicine comes in many forms, and I am blessed with the gift of friendship.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, May we always know your love and grace. Grant us peace always. Amen.

Today’s Thought

God is with us in our darkest and brightest moments.

Embracing a Unique Advent Season

By Tambryn Freund

“When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.”

LUKE 2:15-18

A year ago I wrote about walking with my parents through sickness. Since then, I’ve said goodbye to both my mother and father. Part of that journey also included selling the house I grew up in and considered home for 35 years. When the worship team talked about the theme “Home for the Holidays,” I knew I’d be looking at a unique Advent season. When the building that housed the majority of your core childhood memories is no longer available to you, and the people who built the traditions that encapsulate the major parts of your life are gone, “home” can feel hard. It doesn’t matter whether those changes come from death, separation, illness or any of the ways life causes rifts and change.

So how do we navigate through those moments and still see light in this Advent season full of reminders of the changes?

For me, it’s leaning harder into some things that stay the same. The story of Jesus’s arrival never changes. God reminds us every year in the same way that he is willing to go through all of life’s joys and pains to show his love for us. Even in times of change, I can recreate traditions or reimagine traditions that I’ve long loved to bring a sense of stability to my life.

I also love being reminded that I don’t have to like or be happy about the events in my life. God will be there to walk me through them. The Christmas story reminds me that Joseph doubted God’s plan and feared the changes in his life just as I do, but God reassured him. God gave him not only the strength to stay with Mary but the bravery to abandon his home to flee to Egypt and protect her and Jesus just a little while later.

Finally, the Christmas story reminds me that sometimes, it’s okay to just lay down and rest and God will come with news when he’s ready. The lowly shepherds didn’t do anything grand to earn the right to hear the angels’ songs of Jesus’ arrival. They were just being them. They weren’t even working hard. They were resting, and that’s when they had the heart and time to hear the good news.

So when “home” feels a little like a harsh word this year, I’m going to let myself doubt. I’m going to let myself rest. I’m going to re-read the very familiar story and give God the chance to speak his words of comfort, to remind me that I can be strong, to let me know he is here and that my place will always be in his home – which will never change.

Prayer

Dear God, Thank you for the repetition of the Advent season. Please help me to find joy in things that are the same. Please help me to make space to rest for the days that feel too different. Please help everyone hear the word “home” and think of you whether this is their best Christmas ever or an uncertain new experience. Amen.

Today’s Thought

You always have a home with God.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 23

The Way

By Chris & Charlotte Turner

“And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

JOHN 14:4-6

In a recent small group study of the book, *Life Worth Living: A Guide To What Matters Most*, we explored and pondered many questions around this very topic. There were insights from many different cultures and religions referenced in the text, and one that caught our attention was the concept of “Dao” or “The Way” referenced in Confucianism. For fellow Star Wars fans out there, you will recognize a similar modern-day reference, “This Is The Way,” from the recent series, “The Mandalorian.” An interesting note about these references is that they focus solely on the pure ethical and moral conduct expectations of us as humans.

While there are similar behavioral expectations, a key difference for us as Christians is that everything originates from our faith. We are guided by the two simple rules we’ve been instructed to abide by. Love God. Love One Another. If we adhere to these two commandments, we follow “The Way” laid out by our Father. When acting out of LOVE, there is no question of morality or ethics - there is only LOVE.

We had the wonderful opportunity to accompany a group of fellow DUMC pilgrims to the Holy Land earlier this year, and we think often of our time in Bethlehem, particularly now during the Advent season. How many have made “the way” to that special place? It started with Mary and Joseph - and then, of course, Jesus. But then Shepherds and Kings and millions of pilgrims over the years. Stepping on the same stone paths and ancient streets in these places where our Savior walked is both bewildering and humbling. That trip has helped us both re-focus on “the way” in our lives.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, Thank you for showing us “the way” through the simple commands to love You and one another. We ask that you help bring peace, love and healing to those in the Holy Land during these difficult times. We thank you for the gift of your Son, who is the way, the truth and the life. Amen.

Today’s Thought

How are you focusing on “The Way” this Advent Season?

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 24

Revere the Silent Night

By Megan Cann

He says, "Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth."

PSALM 46:1

As you reflect on this week's Advent theme of "Love is Fulfilled," take a minute to enjoy these words from former Wake Forest University Professor Maya Angelou's poem, "Amazing Peace."

...Christmas enters,
Streaming lights of joy, ringing bells of hope
And singing carols of forgiveness high up in the bright air.
The world is encouraged to come away from rancor,
Come the way of friendship.
It is the Glad Season.
Thunder ebbs to silence and lightning sleeps quietly in the corner.
Flood waters recede into memory.
Snow becomes a yielding cushion to aid us
As we make our way to higher ground...

Prayer

God, During this time of Advent, please help us to move from rancor toward friendship while relishing in peace, love, hope and joy. Amen.

Today's Thought

Take a minute today to revere the silence and prepare your heart for the birth of Christ.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 25

Home for the Holidays

By Megan Biegel

“Every house is built by someone. But God is the builder of everything.”

HEBREWS 3:4

“And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”

LUKE 2:4-14

The word “home” tends to stir lots of feelings when spoken. Home is the place where we seek comfort, the place where we can let our guard down and embrace being our whole selves. Home is a place that provides safety and refuge from a long day. It’s the place Mary and Joseph left to go to Bethlehem for the census.

If you had asked me to describe my home a year ago, I would have told you all about the layout, how it was made up of converted dorm rooms, how it was attached to a boarding school and how unique and exciting it was to live there. If you asked me today to describe my home, it would not be described within walls. You see, this past year my family, like many others in the Atlanta area, dealt with Christmas Eve flooding from busted frozen pipes. We watched as all our belongings and Christmas decorations, along with wrapped Christmas presents became waterlogged. This was a crushing blow during a time that should have been all about good tidings of great joy.

And yet we still managed to squeeze some joy out of Christmas morning, through the excitement of children opening their presents and witnessing the Christmas magic through those smiles. For the months to come we would find temporary housing, without our own beds and toys. This could have been a depressing time and yet when I look back there was still laughter and memories made outside the comfort of what we knew as “home.”

As time continued, we grew to learn the true meaning of the word home. It was not the walls that contained us, it was not the comforts of our beds and things – home existed because we were together. We found comfort with each other, we sought out one another after a long day, and we embraced the joy that could not be washed away with the flood. Home is truly where the heart is. For Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus, home that night was a stable bursting with hope, peace, joy and love.

Prayer

Dear God, On this Christmas day allow our hearts to see our home beyond our walls. Father, we pray for the family before us and the friends who have become family beside us. Allow us to embrace the joy amidst the chaos that comes with the hustle and bustle of Christmas. May we open our eyes to the many blessings you give to us each day as we celebrate the greatest blessing given to us through the birth of your son. We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Today’s Thought

In today’s busyness, remember to embrace the smiles and laughter, along with the traditions and memories, made in the home that exists within the walls.



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