

ADVENT SEASON

Advent symbolizes the present situation of the church in these "last days" (Acts 2:17, Hebrews 1:2), as God's people wait for the return of Christ in glory to consummate his eternal kingdom. The church today is in a similar situation to Israel at the end of the Old Testament: in exile, waiting and hoping in prayerful expectation for the coming of the Messiah. Israel looked back to God's past gracious actions on their behalf in leading them out of Egypt in the Exodus, and on this basis they called for God once again to act for them. In the same way, the church, during Advent 2022, looks back upon Christ's coming in celebration while at the same time looking forward in eager anticipation to the coming of Christ's kingdom when he returns for his people.

Advent is a way of lengthening the joy of Christmas. Our prayer is that God would use these readings to deepen and sweeten your adoration of Jesus this Advent Season and keep him as the center and greatest treasure of your Christmas season. The gifts, candles and candies have their place, but we want to make sure that in all the Christmas rush and excitement, we adore Jesus above all. This is our goal in these Advent devotionals. We want together to see and savor this Jesus whose first "advent" (coming) we celebrate, and whose second advent we anticipate.

If we take time to focus on Christ's birth and strengthen our relationship with Him, this time of the year can become a season of renewal instead of exhaustion.

Members of First Presbyterian Church of Newport, as well as friends and family of our church members, have contributed to this year's Advent Booklet (a few of the devotionals are from Advent devotionals of years past). We pray that the booklet, together with your daily Bible study and prayer, will help you achieve that renewal during this Advent Season.



Sunday, November 27—First Sunday of Advent

THE IMPORTANCE OF ADVENT

Scripture: "a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" Mark 1:3

Reverend Fleming Rutledge, in her remarkable book, *Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ*, reminds us that this season, though closely linked to Christmas, "is not simply a transitional season, but in and of itself communicates a message of immense, even ultimate, importance." Just this week she wrote on Twitter, "Advent is not for sissies."

What is she getting at? Since Advent is not merely about the first coming of Christ, but also about His second coming (that "great and dreadful Day of the Lord," as we heard recently from the book of Joel), Rutledge puts it this way:

Of all the seasons of the church year, Advent

- * most closely mirrors the daily lives of Christians and of the church;
- * asks the most important ethical questions;
- * presents the most accurate picture of the human condition;
- * and, above all, orients us to the future of the God who will come again.

We need this season of Advent. And we need each other. What a joy to live and move through Advent together, as the family of Christ here at First Presbyterian Church. What a gift our brothers and sisters have given us by sharing their reflections, their wisdom, and their hearts in the pages that follow. Some of our devotionals this year are from members and friends from previous Advent Devotionals written years ago.

What we wish most for Christmas this year is to join you (and many others) in seeing Christ in all his fullness. We want for all of us to be able to love what we see with a love far beyond our own half-hearted human capacities. Use these Advent devotionals to see and savor this Jesus whose first Advent (coming) we celebrate, and whose second advent we anticipate. Our prayer is that this little devotional will help you, each day, to keep Jesus as the center and the greatest treasure of this season. Candles, trees, and wreaths have their place, but in all the Christmas rush and celebrations, we adore Jesus above all. That is the true meaning of Christmas.

Prayer: Come, Lord Jesus! Amen

Reverend Jeff Hutchinson

THE LORD YOUR GOD IS IN YOUR MIDST

Scripture: "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

Christmas time is a time of making special memories. Holiday music playing in the stores, singing Christmas carols at school and church. Christmas concerts, and other festive activities abound. Singing is a wonderful way to express our joy in any season, and singing seems to bring out the excitement and joy that we experience during this special time of Advent. Did you know that the Creator of the universe, the King of Kings, and Lord of lords, sings over you? This is what the Scripture tells us.

As you move the hustle and bustle of holiday preparations, be sure to take some time to be alone in a quiet place and close your eyes. Think about what makes Christmas special to you personally. Thank God for the gift of His son and feel your Heavenly Father's love song washing over you, bringing you the indescribable joy and peace that only he can give.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, today fill me with your peace and help me bring peace in all interactions. We are forever grateful that you are always in our midst. Amen.

Darien Petit

MARY, DID YOU KNOW?

Scripture: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel." Matthew 1:23 "... The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth.... And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you... And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word. Luke 2:26-38

My most memorable Christmas was in 1971 when our first child was born December 22, and I was more than usually overwhelmed by the story of Christ's birth. As a new mother reflecting on the role that Mary had been blessed to play and all the various meanings it must have had to a young girl, it was quite amazing and still is.

"Mary Did You Know" (Lyrics by Matt Lowry)

Mary did you know that your baby boy will one day walk on water?

Mary did you know that your baby boy will save our sons and daughters?

Did you know that your baby boy has come to make you new?

This child that you've delivered, will soon deliver you.

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

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

Mary did you know that your baby boy is Lord of all creation?

Mary did you know that your baby boy will one day rule the nations?

Did you know that your baby boy is heaven's perfect Lamb?

This sleeping child you're holding is the great I am.

Even with what Mary was told by Gabriel, how could she possibly have known the true magnitude of being the vessel to bring our Lord and Savior into the world!

Prayer: Dear Lord, may we never cease to wonder at the miracle and meaning of your holy birth. Receive our thankful prayer that the LORD of the universe came to earth as a babe that we might have eternal life. Amen!

Alice Thomas (2019)

CHRISTMAS JOLLIES

Scripture: "For to us a child is born, to us a Son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Isaiah 9:6

Oh how Christmas gives us cheer.

Santa brings presents when midnight is near.

For Jesus' birth,

All have great mirth.

He who was born is the Promised One,

The real present, our gift, His Son

Christmas brings joy

For every little girl and boy

Prayer: Dear God, Thank You for this wonderful holiday and thank You for sending Your Son down from Heaven for our sins. Thank You for giving us so much joy! Amen.

By Lillian Ross, age 7



JOY AND PATIENT ENDURANCE

Scripture: "...let us run the race with endurance that is set before us, fixing our eyes upon Jesus...." Hebrews 12: 1-2

Merry Christmas to all! May you feel the joy of the Lord at Christmas, and all through the year! This is the usual message we hear at Christmas time, and it is always good to hear and to celebrate His birth. But this year I've chosen to write on a bit different angle to Christmas. For the past five years, the Spirit has urged me to have "patient endurance". And as I thought about what to write this Advent Devotional on, I was moved to think of all the many folks we know, and all those we don't know, in the body of Christ and outside it, who are facing great difficulties in their lives. It can be so hard for them to feel joy and peace right now, even more so as those around them celebrate happily. So many of our brothers and sisters in Christ here at FPC, and elsewhere, and in our families and friends, and around the world, are facing devastating situations: war, famine, death. Others face financial difficulties, personal issues, long-term health challenges, other significant life challenges, or the loss of a loved one.

I am praying that they may feel the Lord's endless love for them, His omnipotent strength, and His "everlasting arms" holding them in Christ our Lord. Then, even when we suffer, we can go on. We can even feel His joy and peace in the midst of great difficulties if we focus on what He did for us through Jesus our Savior. Paul assures us in Phil 4: 6-7, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." And Jesus Himself said in John 14:27, "My peace I give to you, not as the world gives, give I unto you." Christmas is the celebration of Christ's birth, and wonderfully so, but it is only the very beginning of the story for those who believe!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, Lord Jesus, Holy Spirit, please comfort all who are suffering this holiday season, but we pray a special blessing on those who know you and the peace that comes from your saving love for us.

Richard Price

HOLY SPIRIT AND BELLS

Scripture: "Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." Jeremiah 29:12–13

Each year, as we approach the Christmas season, I reminisce upon all the Christmas seasons back to my early childhood. Each season has something very much in common. Something that I could never put to words until one day while reading my devotional the writer referred to being filled of the Holy Spirit as the sound of distant and soothing bells.

It dawned on me that the bells that I hear do not make a sound at all. Their soundless waves resonate throughout my entire being, like soothing gentle and warm water flowing throughout every bodily and spiritual sense that I have. It allows me to experience His presence and His love for me. It reminds me, that He is always with me and all I must do is turn off the world, to feel, hear and sense His gentle ever flowing, loving and awesome presence. Knowing this and having this experience baffles me in trying to understand how the world has such power over me, which allows my spirit to wonder away, from and become distracted by the loud and ugly racket of my selfish earthly desires and the blurring of my vision caused by my pride and worldly ego.

Prayer: I pray to You, Heavenly and almighty Father; please give me the strength to focus on You, and You alone, always, in all situations, in all interactions with others, and in all that I think, feel, and perceive.

Allow me to see and interact with others, while looking through Your eyes. In all things, please let me know the peace that is only possible through you. Please let others see your presence with me, that I might be your witness. Please lead me to your service, that the blessings that you have showered upon me, will be to serve and honor You. I confess, honor, ask and thank for all things in the matchless name of Your Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

MUSIC

Scripture: "Make music to the Lord with the harp and the sound of singing, with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn—shout for joy before the Lord, the King." Psalm 98:5-6

Music is, without a doubt, one of the most meaningful and beloved parts of the celebration of Christmas. Throughout scripture we are instructed to make music and sing together to worship the Lord. Music enables God's people to unite in a spiritual experience of praise in a way that nothing else can. The hymns and carols of Christmas stir our hearts, bringing memories of Christmases gone by.

Handel's *Messiah* became part of our family's Christmas story during the years that our children took part in an annual performance with Whitinsville Christian Strings. Hours of practice at home and rehearsal at school culminated in a glorious celebration of music. In the performance of this sublime musical composition—as each young person played their part joined with the singing of powerful words of scripture—beautiful truths of God's word were proclaimed and experienced by all present.

How is it possible that strings stretched across a wooden instrument, with horsehair across a bow, and the substance of air can combine to cause a "sound" carried to the listener's ear to produce an experience of such complex beauty? A musician, a physicist, and a neurologist might each scratch the surface with a meager explanation. But the whole, in this case, is far greater than the sum of the parts. The mystery and power of the gift of music surely testify to the glory of the Creator of all things!

As we enjoy this gift of music during the Christmas season let us contemplate the gift of the Child born in a stable, wrapped in cloths, and placed in a manger, for: "He shall reign forever and ever!"

Prayer: "...Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:18-19)

Regina Skudera

Sunday, December 4—Second Sunday of Advent

ANNUNCIATION

Scripture: "...Let it be done to me according to what you have said..." Luke 1:38 (Please read Luke 1: 26-38.)

In my prayer for what to write for this advent devotion, the Annunciation came to my mind and heart. I have a replica diptych of the Annunciation by Fra Angelico on my prayer room desk that often brings this event to mind.

The angel Gabriel was sent from God to Mary. Mary perceived the angel. She heard and spoke with Gabriel. The point I want to focus on is that Mary was listening. She was silently listening. She heard and she fully received the message by surrendering. "Let it be done to me according to what you have said."

Time spent in silence with God, listening, being present, is always rewarded. Mary was the first to receive Jesus Christ. And it happened according to God's will; Mary listened and surrendered her will to His will. Her response is expressed through a word I am learning about, Kenosis, that is ancient Greek for the act of emptying. One of the highlights of my year is going on silent retreat. Time away, just being present to God and listening. The experience adds beauty and depth to my prayer life. Silence always has the last word.

My hope and prayer is that amidst the busyness of Christmas, may we each take the time to sit, listen and surrender our will to His will.

Prayer: Lord, may we learn to listen attentively. May we see and learn from the beauty of your announcement of the coming of our Lord Jesus to Earth. May we respond as Mary did and surrender our wills to your will. Amen



Cindy Price

A GLORIOUS PREPARATION

Scripture: "But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings." Malachi 4:2

For those who live far from the equator in the Northern >Hemisphere, Advent is a dark time of year. The sun doesn't get very high in the sky, and it only shines for eight hours. It tends to

be cold, and truth be told, Christmas comes at just the right time for us. Our minds are taken off the impending winter freeze and we even look forward to just a little bit of snow to make the season just right.

So it is that the radiance of God bursts forth upon us, reminding us that Christmas has so very little to do with Santa, trees, elves, rain deer, fruitcake, snow, Frank Sinatra, eggnog, children's pageants, shopping, the Grinch, eating, and sending cards. When the glory of God bursts forth among us exposing our sin and calling us to repentance and new life in Jesus Christ, all these things we fill our time with in preparation for Christmas do indeed seem trivial and unexposed to the light. Our traditions seem so far removed from that tiny stable in Bethlehem where a boy was born to dirt-poor parents and laid in a manger.

Yet, when exposed to The Light, the Sun of Righteousness, many of our traditions and preparations for Christmas take on meaning and significance that are lost when we simply go through the motions and muddle through. Even in this dark season, The Light shines and the possibility exists to make our celebration of Christmas soul quenching and healing instead of energy sapping and depressing.

Prayer: Our Heavenly Father, help us to take notice where the Sun of Righteousness is shining as we prepare to celebrate Christmas. Amen.

Reverend Doug Forsberg (Advent 2003)

DAD WRAP

Scripture: "But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us." 2 Corinthians 4:7

During my growing up years, the term "Dad wrap" became part and parcel of our family lexicon. It was especially handy during the Christmas season when it could be applied, appreciated, and experienced in all its glory. A "Dad wrap" was a package found under the Christmas tree with certain bespoke and trademark characteristics that instantly let one know that that package had been wrapped exclusively by Dad. These characteristics included but were not limited to the following: generous applications of scotch tape, irregularly shaped packaging, an assorted patchwork of odd bits of wrapping paper remnants, tightly bound ribbons cut short just at the knot, and at least one smashed bow. Upon encountering one of these uniquely festooned packages on Christmas morning, one was always wont to exclaim, "Well, there's a 'Dad wrap'!" Over the years I found many a longed for and lovely gift contained therein, wrapped without pretense and entirely with love.

With this image in mind, I think of how the Lord sent Jesus to us, the Savior of the world, wrapped in human flesh, to bestow upon us the gift of eternal life, the grace and mercy of God, the joy that surpasses all understanding, and an unbounded, unfathomable love. So too, God made the Holy Spirit to dwell within us, and lodged His heavenly treasure in human vessels, these mere jars of clay. He bids us to be filled with the Holy Spirit, and thereby trusts us to contain the fullness of Himself that we may know Him intimately. Moreover, God bids us to continually reveal the treasure within us that in doing so all may unwrap the truth and know the surpassing power that is God's alone.

Prayer: Father, I thank you that I am but a simple jar of clay, a vessel fashioned by your hands entrusted to contain the beauty, power, and greatness that is you that I might know and reveal to others that you are the great I AM!



Stacie Schultz

CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

Scripture: "Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them." Deuteronomy 4:9

Christmas is a holiday filled with traditions. Each family usually has some kind of tradition associated with the holiday. As a child you do not think that anyone does anything different from what you do in your family. As your world expands, you find out the friend down the street or at school does things differently than your family. It may be when they put up their tree, what kind of tree they put up or what they put on their tree. None of them are right or wrong, just different. When you get married, holidays can be a great source of stress as you must navigate which traditions will live on in your family and which ones will change. As the children grow some traditions have to change. Every season of life requires an evaluation of what to keep and what to let go of.

The Lord wants us to pass along the meaning behind the traditions, the things that draw us closer to Him and the meaning behind the holiday. We gather as a family to eat a meal together, like Christ did at the Last Supper and as we will one day in heaven. We exchange gifts and think of God's gift of salvation and the sacrifice of Christ leaving the glories of heaven to become a baby, and to ultimately lay down His life as payment for our sins. We light candles because Jesus is the light of the world. It is not the individual actions we do but the passing on of the message of Jesus and God's great love for His world that we need to remember.

Prayer: Dear Lord, We pray that we will look at our traditions in a new light this year and remember everything is to remind us of the glory due to You. May we diligently teach our children and grandchildren of all the great things you have done. May our time with our church family also be one filled with the fruit of the Spirit as we worship you together. In Jesus Name, Amen

BALANCE SHEET FOR CHRIST

Scripture: If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. ⁷ But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord . Philippians 3:4-8

As we approach the end of the year we begin to think about our balance sheet for the past year. Our interface with the IRS begins to surface as we try to determine our profit or loss for the year.

This portion of Paul's letter to the Philippians has been called "Paul's Balance Sheet." It is the standard by which he balanced his life, determining its profit or loss. In verses 5 and 6 he enumerates all the things that were advantageous to him. Yet he says that whatever was gain to him was loss for the Lord Jesus Christ. As we study our profit and loss sheets for the past year, we find that the things that were gain to us were loss for Christ.



What about our time? For whom do we use it? Our talents? Our friendships? Our possessions? Our pleasures? As we balance these things on the profit and loss sheets of our lives, are they profit or loss for Christ?

Paul's supreme goal in life was to know Christ and to make Him known to others. "For my determined purpose is that I may know Him, that I may progressively become more deeply and intimately acquainted with Him, perceiving and recognizing and understanding the wonders of His Person more strongly and more clearly...." (Phil. 3:10-Amplified)

All is loss compared to the priceless privilege of knowing Him and making Him known to others. A question for each of us: what are the entries on our ledger sheet—profit or loss for Christ?

Prayer: Our gracious and loving Father, like Paul we strive to make our goal now and in the coming year one of seeing You more clearly, loving You more dearly, following You more nearly, and making You known to others. Amen.

CHRISTMAS IS LOVE

Scripture: "If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal..." 1 Corinthians 13

While thinking about a devotional for this year's Advent, I came across the following by Sharon Jaynes where she paraphrases 1 Corinthians 13. It is a good reminder of where my (our) priorities at Christmas should be focused.

- ◆ If I decorate my house perfectly with lovely plaid bows, strands of twinkling lights, and shiny glass balls, but do not show love to my family, I'm just another decorator. If I slave away in the kitchen, baking dozens of Christmas cookies, preparing gourmet meals, and arranging a beautifully adorned table at mealtime, but do not show love to my family, I'm just another cook. If I work at the soup kitchen, carol in the nursing home, and give to charity, but do not show love to my church and friends, it profits me nothing.
- ◆ If I trim the spruce with shimmering angels and crocheted snowflakes, attend a myriad of holiday parties, and sing in the choir's cantata but do not focus on Christ, I have missed the point.
- ◆ Love stops the cooking to think about the real meaning of why Christ came to earth.
- ◆ Love sets aside the decorating to spend time in God's Word.
- ◆ Love is kind, though harried and tired.
- ◆ Love doesn't envy another home that has coordinated Christmas china and table linens.
- ◆ Love doesn't become impatient with others to get out of your way because you have so much to do.
- ◆ Love doesn't give only to those who are able to give in return, but rejoices in giving to those who can't.
- ◆ Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things.
- ◆ Love never fails. Video games will break, pearl necklaces will be lost, golf clubs will rust. But giving the gift of love will endure.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank You for sending Your Son, Jesus, on that starry night in Bethlehem. I am still amazed at Your great love for me. May I never lose sight of the true meaning of Christmas, but celebrate Jesus' birth with joy! Help me to give as You gave—with love. Amen.

Saturday, December 10

FOLLOW ME

Scripture: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me." John 14:1

"...I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." John 14:6

How many times have I heard Him say, "Follow Me"? The first time was when I first heard Him call me and I decided to follow. I call this my crawling stage. I kept bumping into my pride, my self-righteousness, my self-consciousness, and any other self-word you can think of.

His voice still echoes today: "BE still and know that I AM GOD."

Jesus was born on earth to show me my great need of a Savior and how much Father God loves each of us. Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Prayer: Trust and Obey, for there is no other way. Amen and Amen

Marge Silvia (2015)



Sunday, December 11—Third Sunday in Advent

PRAYING

Scripture: "Protect me, O God; I trust in You for my safety." (Psalm 16:1)



Prayer is not a scheme whereby we can move God into our lives, but rather, a spiritual exercise through which we draw ourselves toward God until we are a part of *His* plan and *His* purpose. The purpose of prayer is not to give us what we want when we want it, but to make us the kind of person God wants us to be.

My own earthly father opened all of his prayers at the dinner table each night with: "Our Dear Heavenly Father, as we approach your throne of Grace..." I like to use that same opening when I begin my prayers, because it reminds me of my father when I was growing up.

"Hear my humble prayers, Lord." I use that opening a lot at the end of a bad or difficult day. "Gracious Father," when I'm thanking God, followed by "... thank You for making me and for saving my soul." "My Gracious Redeemer who art in heaven," or "my Father, full of grace."

Continue praying every day, pronounce His name when you pray. Living God, I'm grateful for the tender way you help me in my walk with You, I surrender my life to Your care.

"Our Father who art in heaven" should be a familiar opening to everyone, Naomi Circle opens all our lessons with The Lord's Prayer. Because of the pandemic my lesson was not delivered, Today is the day. Be joyful always when you pray!

Prayer: Thank You, Lord God, for Jesus, the Christ child. Amen!

Eleanor Green (2020)

LISTEN TO THE MUSIC

Scripture: Trust in the Lord with all your heart, And do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your paths straight.

Proverbs 3:5-6

To encourage her young son's progress on the piano, a mother took her boy to a concert by the famous Polish artist and patriot, Jan Paderewski. As they were seated, the mother spotted a friend and walked over to greet her. The house lights dimmed, and the mother returned to her seat to find her child was missing. Suddenly, the curtains parted and spotlights focused on the impressive Steinway. In horror, the mother saw her little boy sitting at the keyboard, innocently picking out "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star."



At that moment, the great piano master made his entrance, quickly moved to the piano, and whispered in the boy's ear, "Don't quit. Keep playing." Then, leaning over, he reached down with his left hand and began filling in a bass part. Soon his right arm reached around to the other side of the child, and he added a running obligato. Together, the old master and the young novice transformed the moment into a wonderfully creative experience, and the audience was mesmerized.

The accuracy of this story cannot be proven, but its message rings true. Whatever our situation in life, however desperate, God is whispering deep within us, "Don't quit. Keep playing. You are not alone. Together, we will mesmerize the world with our song of peace and hope."

What we can accomplish on our own is hardly noteworthy. However, with the love of the Master, our life's work can truly be beautiful. Listen for the voice of the Master whispering in your ear, "Don't quit." During this Christmas season, and always, let us remember how deeply God loves every one of us, and how we can accept and share that love with those around us.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help me to hear Your voice, to listen to Your guidance and lean on Your support. Do not let me give up, help me to 'keep playing.' Amen!

Sandra Lang (2017)

A CHRISTMAS ACROSTIC

Scripture: "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord." Luke 2:11 "But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." Luke 2:19

Because Christ lay in his bed
It was also what the angel said
Rightly written in Mary's heart
Those words set apart
How Christmas came to be for all, even you and me

Prayer: Dear Lord, Thank you for sending your only Son whom you sent to die for our sins. Help us to remember the Christmas story all year long. Amen.

Frank Ross, Age 10



WHY DID HE COME?

Scriptures: "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." Matthew 20:28
"...I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." John 10:10
"At the name of Jesus ever knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the Glory of God the Father." Philippians 2:10

Have you ever been in a situation in which people around you had a different idea of what your role should be from what you expected it to be? This happened to me on a few occasions in my life with the result of consternation for everyone involved.

At the first Advent of the Lord Jesus, there was definitely a different expectation from the Jewish nation about the role of the Messiah from what He was sent by the Father to do. The Jews expected a powerful political leader who would throw off the yoke of the Roman Empire and restore Israel as a sovereign nation. Even His closest disciples were expecting to be officials in His earthly kingdom (Matthew 20:21). Jesus, however, was concerned with "the kingdom of heaven." His mission was a spiritual one, dealing with the fallen condition of not only Israel, but also of the whole human race. Because of what Jesus did on our behalf (gave His life as a ransom for many), we can enjoy the abundant life offered to all those who believe in Him.

The earthly kingdom of the Messiah promised in the Scriptures is yet to come and one day "every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord". Hallelujah!

Prayer: Father, as we are reminded of what the Lord Jesus went through for our sakes, we thank You again for His great love. Amen!

Dick Falb (2013)

EMPTY CHRISTMAS

Scripture: "But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever; sat down at the right hand of God." Hebrews 10:12

Many individuals don't understand Christmas. They never think beyond the Babe in the manager. But Christmas is about emptiness—an empty throne, an empty manager, an empty cross, and an empty tomb, all of which fill our empty hearts. It's a circuit. Why? Because, when Jesus traveled from heaven to earth, He used a round-trip ticket with stops along the way. He left the throne for the manger, the manger for the cross, the cross for the tomb, and the tomb for the throne. He left blessings behind at every stop. He emptied Himself so we might be filled. That's the true story of Christmas.

That means Jesus came into the world with the Cross in mind. Since God cannot die, the Second Person of the Trinity entered into the human race through the virgin womb of Mary, taking on flesh and becoming a man. He did this to offer Himself as a sacrifice for our sins. He was born to die; and He died to rise again. Because of His death, we can live forgiven; and because of His resurrection, we can live forever. That's why an "empty" Christmas is so fulfilling.

Prayer: Our gracious and loving Father, we thank You for the empty cross and tomb and for what it means—that because of it, You have provided a means for us to have access to You and become part of Your family, the family of God. Amen!

Member FPC 2018



THIRSTY

Scripture: "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire, and burned." John 15:5-6

Christmas just wasn't Christmas at our house until a real Christmas tree stood tall and proud near the fireplace gracing our abode with its lofty boughs and piney aroma which wended its way throughout each room bearing with it the delightful headiness of the holidays. Dad would ensure the tree was sturdily installed in the stand and well-watered. Then Mom oversaw the placement of multi-colored strings of lights which cascaded their way, in colorful profusion, from top to bottom. At last, my brother and I would join in decorating the tree with beloved ornaments that had lain 'neath layers of tissue paper waiting to be drawn from their year-long rest and hung upon the supple branches. After the ornaments came the angel, the crowning glory, lovingly placed atop the tree to complete the adornment. Finally, all of us would stand back as the room lights were dimmed to admire our Christmas tree in all its splendorous illumination.

As the season wore on, many an evening was spent near the Christmas tree with family and friends alike, all culminating in Christmas morning when mounded presents were at last unwrapped and stockings emptied of their contents. All the while, our tree stood stalwartly, a witness to the merry proceedings. Little by little, needles would begin to drop from its branches, and its boughs begin to sag with the weight of the ornaments. It drank less and less water until, at last, it ceased altogether. Gone was the heady fragrance, replaced instead by a dry brittleness. Eventually, the lights, ornaments, and angel were removed, and the tree stood denuded, a withered shadow of its former self. Dad would take it outside where he cut it and stacked it with our firewood.

When we are in Christ, we are "like a tree planted by streams of living water," (Psalm 1:3), the living water that is Christ alone by whom we are nourished and nurtured such that His character and presence is revealed through us as we seek His will and His way. This connectivity, this rootedness in the Almighty is the sole source of our vigor, our joy, and our effectiveness for His kingdom glory. When we drink deeply of Him and are entwined with the verdancy that is tantamount to His glory, we thrive. This is not because of what we do, but because of the One to whom we are grafted by grace. Without Him, we are but hollow husks. Though our animated outward appearance may belie for a time, the emerging emptiness hastens its fingering way through our souls such that we decay from the inside out, ever diminishing the Light meant for us in love until it dims and is no more.

Prayer: Father, may I always be cognizant that you are the vine, and I am the branches. I am nothing, I am empty without you. May I always quench my thirst in the goodness of your living water so that my branches might bear the fruit of the true vine to the glory of God.

"JESUS WAS HOMELESS TOO"

Scripture: "Foxes have holes, birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." (Matthew 8:20)

The Boston Common is a beautiful city park. It is visited by thousands of people each December for the purposes of enjoying Christmas lights strung in the trees, to fulfill childhood dreams of a first skate on Frog Pond, or simply as a place for couples to stroll along lovely, winding paths. The Boston Common is also the symbolic home for the 6,001* homeless people in Boston. (* Number from the 2001 census count of those homeless taken by the City of Boston.)

Matthew, who has been homeless for five years, said to me with enthusiasm one day, "Paul, did you know Jesus was homeless?" What a bizarre thought! All the years I have reflected on my Lord's life on earth, I had never thought of Jesus as homeless. Yet, Jesus was the one who said "the Son of Man has no place to lay His head." And if I remember correctly, wasn't He born in a stable "because there was no room for them in the inn?"

There is a special connection, a shared experience, between Jesus and those who are homeless. It may be one that many of us cannot fully understand. Jesus was born to bring salvation and hope. He has an extraordinary concern for those who are naked, hungry, thirsty, and strangers. In the midst of this beautiful season, may we not pass by those in need. May our hearts be stretched, tugged, and pulled to the extreme. A woman died last night in an outdoor bin filled with clothes for the homeless. At that moment, I am sure Jesus wept.

Prayer: Lord, we pray this day for all the men, women, teenagers and children who are homeless. We ask that during this holy season, they may experience Your love and life in tangible ways. Quicken us to follow in Jesus' steps with concern for the physical and spiritual needs of all who cross our path in life. We need You Jesus. Oh come, oh come, Emmanuel. Come. Amen.

Paul Malkames

December 18—Fourth Sunday of Advent

JOY TO THE WORLD

Scripture: "Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, . . ." I Peter 1:8



"Joy to the world, All the boys and girls now, Joy to the fishes in the deep blue sea, Joy to you and me."

When I first heard that song back in the 70s I was so excited to think there was a popular song about Jesus coming into the world bringing us joy. Well, unfortunately that wasn't what the song was about.

But one of my favorite Christmas carols is "Joy to the World." What a wonderful message it proclaims: "the Lord has come . . . Let earth receive her King; Let every heart prepare Him room, And Heaven and nature sing, And Heaven and nature sing, and Heaven, and Heaven and nature sing."

When the angel Gabriel appeared to Zacharias, he promised "You will have joy and gladness and many will rejoice" (Luke 1:14). God's desire is that we would experience the good tidings of great joy proclaimed by the angels over 2,000 years ago.

"Joy" or "Rejoice" appears in the English Standard Version of the Bible 430 times. I read somewhere, "God loved us enough to send his only begotten Son. Think of it this way: He didn't send a committee, He didn't write a book, He didn't send a substitute. No, when God got ready to save the world, he sent the best that He had—His one and only Son. And in sending Jesus, he was really sending Himself. This is the stupendous truth of Christmas: Immanuel—God with us."

Over two thousand years ago, God sent a gift wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. Jesus is God's Christmas gift to us. We find joy in the presence of the Lord. Focusing on Christ—who He is, what He's done to save us, and His promise to keep us—brings a joy that can't compare with temporary happiness.

Prayer: Lord, Please help us to share the joy that You gave us that Christmas morning with all we come in contact. Amen.

Barbara Estes (2018)

CHRISTMAS THROUGH OUR YEARS

Scripture: To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven. Ecclesiastes 3:1

Through the changing seasons of our lives there is one beautiful constant —Christmas. It thrills us as children as we see the decorations, hear the stories and songs of Jesus and angels, of Santa and reindeer, of love and giving. We hang our stockings, say our prayers, and open our presents.

As teenagers we experience the joy of keeping the magic alive for the younger ones in the family, for not only hearing, but singing the songs, giving to the poor, and understanding more about the true meanings of this wonderful holiday. We help make the cookies, trim the tree, make gifts, keep secrets, and join celebrations.

As young adults, newly married, we discover the joy of beginning new family traditions, sharing the day with new extended-family members, combining our new love for each other and our abiding love for Jesus.

When our own babies are born we find a new dimension of joy, and we understand better the joy of that long-ago birth that changed the world. We hug the little ones, cook, shop, sing carols, send cards, buy gifts and attend church services.

As the years go by, we watch our children's excitement and joy. We watch them go through the same growth in understanding that we experienced, and our joy becomes heartfelt thanksgiving for the wonderful blessings Christmas has brought into our lives, through times of happiness and times of sadness—all the seasons of our lives.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for bringing such joy into all the seasons of our lives. May we be worthy of Your grace. Amen.

Sandra Lang (2018)



GRACE CARD

Scripture: "Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven." Matthew 18:21-22

As we approach Christmas, we can't help but get caught up in the excitement of the season and the significance of the birth of our Savior. And yet at the same time there is also, at least for me, some frustration during this time of the year. As I write this I'm still trying to find that perfect gift for members of my family. That is one reason for the frustration. The other is what awaits me in the coming year—the arrival of bills for charges made to my credit cards.

John Fischer, in one of his daily devotionals, introduced me to a concept that puts a new light on credit cards—a "grace card." Because we have feet of clay, we are bound to fail each other over and over again. And we fail without knowing, because expectations are usually too high for



others to meet. We need a "grace card" to maintain our relationships, whether it is with our spouse, other family members, or friends. When Peter asked Jesus how many times, he should forgive his brother he was told to try 70 times 7. He didn't mean that when we get to 491, we say, "No more—I'm not forgiving you anymore." He was saying that we shouldn't put a number on it, and if we do, make it so large that we can't keep track of it.

A "grace card" is a great card to carry and what is really nice is that we can draw out as much as we need, for ourselves, and for those who offend us, or sin against us, or disappoint us, or let us down. We all need a "grace card." The account was opened for us by Jesus going to the cross. But just like a credit card, it needs to be accepted and activated. You already have a "grace card" if you have accepted Jesus as your personal savior. Why not activate it and use it. I've used mine more than once today. "Grace Card"—no relationship is possible without one. "Grace Card" -- "Don't leave home without it."

Prayer: Father, thank You for the sacrifice of Your Son who paid it all. Amen.

Member FPC (2019)

GOD'S MIRACLES

Scripture: "For it is written, He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you." Luke 4:10

It was 1973, and my young sailor husband, our baby daughter, and I were driving across West Texas after a holiday visit with our families in El Paso. The first several hundred miles of the trip traversed a desolate stretch of the Chihuahuan desert, with enough miles between gas stations that we had to know when to gas up or we might run out of fuel. Suddenly our VW started making a horrible screeching sound.

Miracle Number One, we were just approaching an exit with probably the only gas station for 90 miles. Richard coasted down the exit ramp into the gas station to diagnose the problem, which turned out to be a broken generator pulley. It was a Sunday, and the mechanic could not order the part until the next day, and even then he would have to order it and we would have to wait until Monday or maybe longer to get back on the road. Now in 1973, people didn't have the conveniences we take for granted now, like cell phones, computers, or Visa credit cards that you could use just about anywhere. If you were headed out on a long-distance trip, you took the money you needed with you because you had to pay cash for motels, gasoline (unless you had a gas company credit card, which we did not), and meals. We were twenty years old, and we did not have very much money. We had expected to make the drive from El Paso to Austin in one day, and we certainly did not have the cash on us for either a motel room or expensive car repairs.

Miracle Number Two, at that very moment, a Lieutenant Commander being transferred from the East to West Coast just happened to pull into the same filling station to gas up. He had two cars, so he was towing one of them and guess what it was? A VW, just like ours! Would he be willing to sell us the generator pulley from his VW so we could get back on the road? He could see the pitiful situation we were in, stranded in the middle of nowhere, a young sailor with his pregnant wife and baby, so he sold it to us for something like three bucks. Even so, that was most of our money and we were barely able to buy enough gasoline to make it back to Austin. This happened over forty years ago and it was only recently, upon reflection, that I recognized the hand of God protecting us in what could have been a disastrous situation. What are the odds that our car would die just at the exit ramp in the middle of the desert? What are the odds that someone would pull into that very station towing a car that had the very part we needed? And that he would sell it to us so cheap? Truly, God sent us a Good Samaritan that day.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we do not always recognize your holy provision. As we enter Advent, awaken our hearts to your presence in every corner of our lives. Amen!

I HEARD THE BELLS ON CHRISTMAS DAY

Scripture: "And He will be their peace." (Micah 5:5)

I'm a firm believer in the phase "in God's own time," and have come to realize through the years that He always answers prayers, but not necessarily on our time schedule or in the way we expect. While reading through Kenneth Osbeck's Amazing Grace, a devotional of inspiring hymn stories, I came across the story of the origin of the hymn "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day." Osbeck's story underscored once more for me "in God's own time."

In the story he tells how the cruel miseries caused by the Civil War greatly distressed the beloved American poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. During the height of the war, after his son was severely wounded, with a heavy heart he put his thoughts into words to create this fine carol. Since he was the most influential American poet of his day, Longfellow brought fresh courage and renewed faith to many of his countrymen who read this poem. He maintained a strong belief in God's goodness and personal concern for His people. "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day" was written in 1864 for the Sunday school of the Unitarian Church of the Disciples in Boston, Massachusetts. It originally had seven stanzas and was titled "Christmas Bells." References to the Civil War are prevalent in the omitted verses. The plain, direct wording of the present five stanzas gives this clear message: God is still in command and in His own time will cause the right to triumph and will bring peace and good will once more. The beautiful chiming bells of Christmas reassure us of this important truth.

Prayer: Our Heavenly Father we thank You for the gift of Your Son and the assurance that peace and good will once more come because of that gift.

Amen

Don Estes (2020)

HOLY LIGHTS OF CHRISTMAS

Scripture: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." John 8:12

One of my favorite moments of the entire year is the candlelit Christmas Eve service. As I sit in my pew, my focus shifts from the tiny light I pass to the kids' candles to the entire sanctuary aglow with a hundred or more lights. And despite my familiarity with the service, I'm always surprised by a rush of peace and happiness and a sense of connection as I see everyone's faces illuminated by light that all came from the flame of the Christ candle.

There is so much symbolism in this simple tradition. Lighting candles at Christmastime is an old tradition; so old there is no real answer to where or when it originated. And though we'll never know the true number, I find it wonderful to contemplate how many Christians have shared this tradition since Jesus' birth. Like knowledge of the gospels that has been passed to each other, the flame on Christmas Eve is passed between believers; both mature and new. This concept of lighting candles unifies us all across the barriers of time as we celebrate the birth of our Messiah.

In the scriptures Jesus declares Himself to be the light of the world. As we hold our candles on Christmas Eve, I like to reflect on how I am symbolically holding His light close to my heart; a light that lives within us and grows brighter as we grow in Him.

I hope you will join a Christmas Eve service this year. Allow His light to unify yourself not only with all those in attendance, but all those who have in the past, or will in the future, hold a candle on the eve of His birthday celebration. Allow the light of Jesus to be close to your heart and behold the majestic moments of the sanctuary illuminated by light from His candle. Allow the memory of that night to fill your thoughts as we close our advent season and keep it burning in your heart as you allow Jesus' light to shine through you in the coming new year. And remember that the Light, which you held, lives in you all year through.

FINISHING WELL

Scripture: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." Hebrews 12:1-2

We have reached the end of another year and now face a new one. When we stood in this same spot 364 days ago, many of us looked ahead to what the Lord was going to teach us in the coming year, and we anticipated the many ways we were going to see Him at work in our lives. We said, "By the end of this year we will discover that God had wondrous things for us which we would never have known or experienced had we not accepted the challenge changes inevitably bring."

Today, as you look back over the past weeks and months, what do you see? How have His grace, joy, and love touched your life? When we began the year, we also talked about finishing well. The reality is, of course, we are not finished. The race is not over. Our lives are still being perfected. We still need much more of the Master's touch.

Prayer: Our Heavenly Father, we thank You for being an ever presence in our life and how You continue to comfort us as we confront the daily challenges in our lives. Amen!

Member FPC Newport (2019)



THE BIRTH OF JESUS

In the second chapter of Luke, verses 1-20, is recorded the greatest story every told. It's a reading that we would do well to read many times during the course of the year and not to just set it aside for a Christmas reading.

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria. And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, unto the city of David, which?

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 Savior, 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. And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.

And they came with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things, which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

Luke 2:1-20 (KJV)

First Presbyterian Church 4 Everett Street Newport RI 02840



Non-Profit
Organization
US Postage
PAID
Permit No. 4

Newport, RI 02840