

PHUMC's A
CHRISTMAS
CAROL



Advent Devotional Guide
2014



During this season of joy and peace I wish to express my grateful appreciation to you, the congregation and staff of Pulaski Heights United Methodist Church, for your many contributions to this 2014 Advent Devotional Guide.

Whether young or old, newcomer or life-long member, each of us has been blessed by the love and support we find at PHUMC. Our aim with this publication is to provide a means whereby you and our entire community of faith can join together in preparation for the birth of the Christ child.

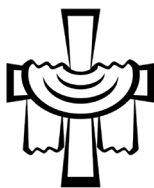
This book, with illustrations by our children, contains daily meditations written by church members and friends. Also included are suggested scripture readings and prayers, as well as a calendar and descriptions of events offered at Pulaski Heights UMC during the seasons of Advent/Christmas.

In the midst of this hectic holiday time, I pray you will enjoy using this 2014 Advent Devotional Guide as you reflect upon God's great gift to us in Jesus Christ.

Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus!

Britt Skarda
Senior Pastor

ADVENT CALENDAR OF EVENTS



**Saturday, December 6
8 am**

Breakfast in Bethlehem, Great Hall

This free-of-charge Christmas event includes breakfast, crafts, and a special retelling of the Christmas story.

**Sunday, December 7
9 & 11 am**

Daniel Pinkham's "Christmas Cantata," Sanctuary

A Christmas presentation of the choir, brass, organ, and dancers.

**Friday, December 12
6 pm**

Acoustic Carols: The Ghost of Christmas Present, Sanctuary

A "Lessons and Carols" service presented with a down-home folk feel.

**Sunday, December 14
9 & 11 am**

Advent Service of Lessons and Carols, Sanctuary

Hear the prophets foretell Jesus' birth through scripture and song from PHUMC's Music Ministry.

Acoustic Carols: The Ghost of Christmas Present, Wesley Hall

A "Lessons and Carols" service presented with a down-home folk feel.

**Sunday, December 14
6 pm**

Winter Peace, Wesley Hall

Phyouth will lead worship through spoken word and song.

**Tuesday, December 23
6 pm**

Christmas Eve Eve Service, Wesley Hall

A great alternative for those who travel at Christmas. Join us for a beautiful contemporary Christmas Candlelight service before heading out for the holidays.

**Wednesday, December 24
Noon, 2 pm, 6 pm,
8 pm, 11 pm**

Christmas Eve Candlelight Communion Services, Sanctuary

Worship services to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ.

**Wednesday, December 24
4 pm**

Christmas Eve Children and Family Service, Great Hall

Children re-enact the Christmas story with live animals, decorate the Christ Child's tree, and sing carols!

(Childcare provided at all services except the Christmas Eve 11 pm service)

Christmas Eve trolley hours • 3:00 - 9:30 pm

Candle Lighting Service

For The First Sunday in Advent
November 30, 2014

Advent means “to come”.
Who was to come?
A Savior, Jesus.
People hoped for a Savior long ago.
That Savior came to earth.
We celebrate his birthday each Christmas.

Advent begins today,
just four Sundays before Christmas.
People hope that day by day
peace and joy will come into their hearts
as they think about Jesus and all that he did.

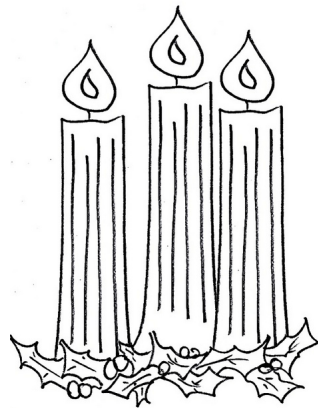
An Advent wreath
reminds us of this time.
Four candles – light one each week
until all are burning brightly.

Let’s call the first candle
the Prophet’s Candle.
Light it now.
it reminds us that long ago
prophets told of Jesus’ birth.

**“For to us a child is born,
To us a Son is given...”**

The prophets were right!
Jesus was a special person.
Jesus came to light the way
for us into God’s Kingdom.

**Thank you for Jesus, our Savior.
Help us to get our homes and hearts
ready to celebrate the good news of Jesus’
birth this Christmas. Amen.**



Sunday, November 30, 2014

³² ...But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come..., keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, ³⁶or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.

- Mark 13:24-37

The Necessity for Watchfulness

Today is a very special day -- the first Sunday of Advent! The countdown has started as we move quickly to Christmas Day! Bells are ringing, decorated trees are on display, and people are shopping and preparing to give to others. Children and parents are excited and full of hope and anticipation. Christians around the world are watching and preparing to celebrate the Advent of Jesus Christ.

During the season of Advent there is a great need for watchfulness. This season is intended to be a time of great joy, family togetherness, gift giving, and thankfulness. At the same time we are called to be mindful of those for whom this season is stressful. Trevor Hudson, South African author and past Raney Lecturer, said that we all sit next to our own “pool of tears.”

The Christmas season can be an emotionally difficult time for people who are experiencing anxiety, worry, fear, feelings of failure, depression, drug/alcohol addiction, aging, stress, unemployment, loss or brokenness of a relationship, loneliness, illness, the death of a loved one, or the temporary loss of daily freedom.

Those who are having difficulty should not lose hope and expectation for better days ahead. Instead, remember that Advent is a season of “Hope and Healing.” Our hope is in the Christ Child! If you know someone who is not feeling well during this season, recommend a caring community like PHUMC. Those experiencing hardships may need someone to listen, visit, send a card, or call them during the holidays.

Christmas preparation and watchfulness allows us to create space in our hearts and in our lives to bless others and to receive joy and peace. The Good News of Christmas is that Christ has come, and is coming again! Merry Christmas, and have a Blessed New Year!

Prayer: *Gracious God, as we watch for the Advent of the Jesus Christ, help us to see the needs of others in our community and in the world. Bind up our broken-heartedness, free us, release us, and replace our difficulties with joy. Take off our garments of despair, and dress us with praise! Amen.*

– Dr. Jeffery B. Hampton

Monday, December 1, 2014

¹ Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. ³ A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵ Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." ⁶ A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. ⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. ⁹ Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" ¹⁰ See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. ¹¹ He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

-Isaiah 40:1-11

In the Old Testament the prophet Isaiah cries out to the believers that despite their troubled and pained lives, comfort was on the way from their Lord God! He tells them that their God would care for them as tenderly as a shepherd cares for his flock. Isaiah calls on the people to "prepare the way of the Lord" and His coming. He implores them to roll up their sleeves, to put their work boots on and get out and "make straight in the desert a highway". Preparation is important work! It is so important that the words of Isaiah are repeated in the New Testament by John the Baptist beseeching his hearers to prepare for the coming of Christ.

I think today of my family coming to my home for the holidays. What if I did nothing before the day of their arrival? What if after nine hours on the road and long airline flights with high hopes and expectations of the holidays my children and grandsons arrived at my home and walked into an empty house? No food in the fridge, no Christmas tree, no one there to greet them... just a dark empty house? It makes me wonder will my heart be properly prepared to welcome Jesus when I celebrate His birth this holiday season? It is my prayer that He will find the valleys of my fears have been lifted, the crooked roads of my desires have been straightened and the hills of my ego have been softened by prayer, study, and love. May he find all of us with our preparations complete and our hearts waiting to receive the comfort, love and peace of the Christ Child.

– Nancy Bartlett

Tuesday, December 2, 2014

¹⁴ *The days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will fulfill the gracious promise I made to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah. ¹⁵ In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line; He will do what is just and right in the land. ¹⁶ In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The Lord is Our Righteousness.*

- Jeremiah 33:14-16

Going into this advent season I find myself thinking about the promises God made. As a parent I have found it sometimes hard to keep promises. I make promises to my children to keep the peace or because they catch me at a weak moment. Sometimes I don't even remember making a promise; my nine year old is good at trying to get this by me.

My children both make promises to me also. "I'll clean my room after this show, I promise." "I'll do my homework after I play with my friends, I promise." "I promise I will practice the piano after I play this video game." Sometimes, despite what I am sure are good intentions, these promises are broken.

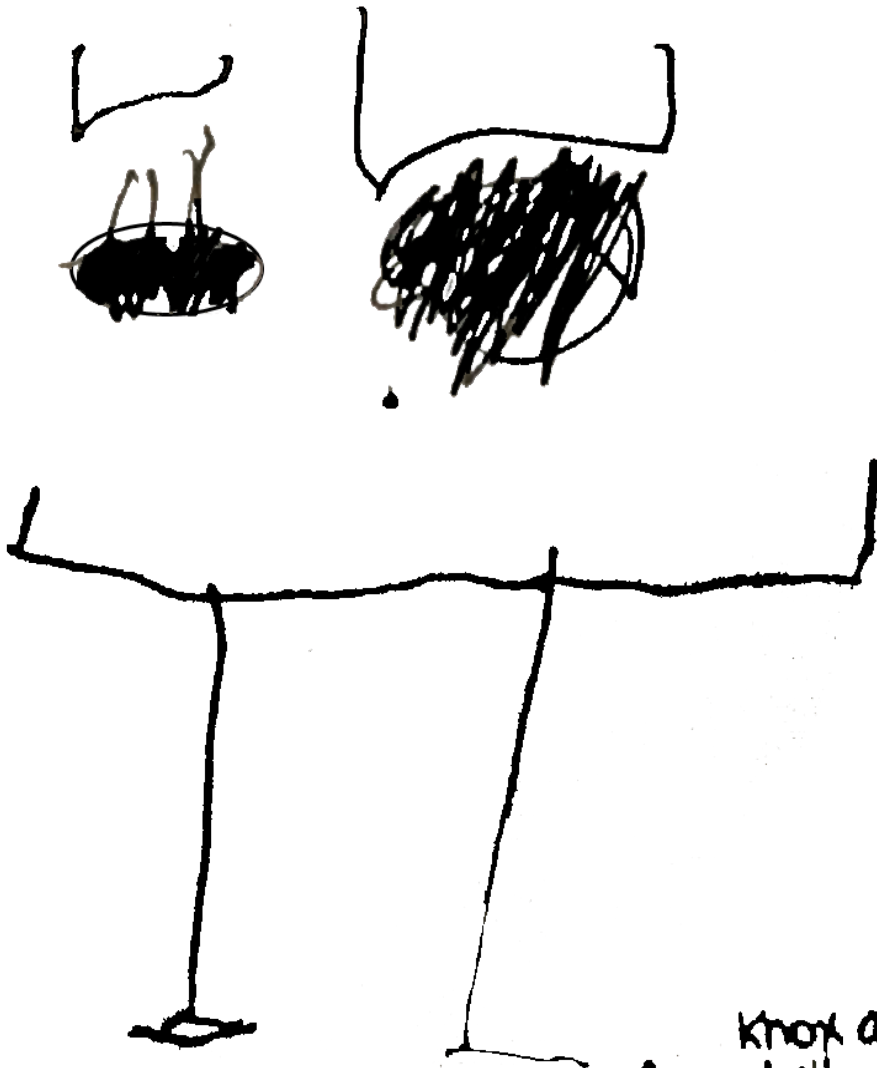
God does not break his promises. In Jeremiah he promises us Jesus is coming to reign and that some day he will come again. In a world filled with broken promises by people, God's promises stand as a light. As we celebrate the birth of Jesus we embrace the promise that God made us. We rejoice that God sent Jesus to us to show us the way and to reign in our hearts. We celebrate this perfect gift, this perfect promise.

Prayer: *God, thank You for keeping Your promises. Thank You for Your Son. Thank You for the promise that Christ will come again. Amen.*

– Becky Langley

Wednesday, December 3, 2014

This is what “peace” looks like to this child. Read **Micah 5: 2-5a** and think about what peace looks like to you. Where is peace in your life? How are you fostering peace in the lives of others? What about peace in places far away? Say a prayer for different kinds of peace.



Knox and
Annabelle Allbritton

Thursday, December 4, 2014

¹ See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. ² But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; ³ he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness.

- Malachi 3:1-3

The mysteries and surprises of life are endless. Be open to your heart, and be open to the words of others. Our Lord speaks to us in myriad ways and times. His word is not obvious to us unless we listen. If our hearts are open and if we listen, we will perceive His word. Seize the message when it is given.

– Stewart Noland

What if I were to read in the morning newspaper or see an announcement on social media (Facebook, Twitter), or perhaps on TV that God is sending a “messenger” to prepare the way, cleanse the spirit, to make sinners holy and that person (the messenger) would be at PHUMC at 10:00 a.m. the following Saturday? WOW!!! Would I go? Would others come? What would the expectations be? In this season of Advent, Christians are preparing for a coming; watching for the Lord who will free us from sin and teach us to keep God at the forefront. I am thinking this messenger, who is preparing for the Lord to come, just might be the ticket. I want in on this.

I am guilty of not always walking with God, not holding up my end of the journey. I am not giving unto God all that is his. I am falling short. Christians know that God, at some point, will send a messenger to let us know that the Lord is coming and will teach us to take care of our shortcomings. This teaching will be difficult for us; but from out of this difficulty, we will do what we should have been doing all along. We will change. God will be watching. He will be looking for us to repent from sin; and at that time, we will walk with Him, be at peace and have righteousness.

Prayer: *Dear God, help us to recognize our shortcomings, to learn to walk in your way and be what you created us to be. Amen.*

– Sarah Jane Polk

Friday, December 5, 2014

Readings: *Luke 1: 24-25; 39-45; 56-57*

Family Memory Verse:

⁴⁵ *And blessed is she that believed: for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord.*

Discussion Starter:

Does the Lord bless us when we have faith in him?

Discussion:

Elizabeth, Mary's Aunt, conceives a baby at a very old age. She is ashamed and hides. Soon after, teenaged Mary finds out that she is going to have a baby, and struggles to understand why it happened to her. The only person she can think of who would understand her is Elizabeth. The angel mentioned to her that Elizabeth was also pregnant.

Mary hurries to visit Elizabeth for guidance. When Mary arrives at Zachariah and Elizabeth's house, Elizabeth is surprised to see her and questions why the mother of her Lord would want to seek advice from her.

The scripture leads us to believe that Mary's greeting was so powerful that Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

Mary's faith in God is revealed to Elizabeth and Elizabeth is now relieved that she is not alone anymore either. They both praise God and give thanks.

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, we are grateful for your blessings upon each of us. Thank you for knowing what is best for us even when it doesn't seem convenient in our own lives. Thank you for putting each and every one of us in each other's lives. Help us to reach out to those in need and to allow ourselves to accept your help in return. Amen.*

– Rich, Leigh-Alyson, Maddie, and Connor Walters

Saturday, December 6, 2014

Meditate on these words, and think about what this “light” means to you...

I want to walk as a child of the light; I want to follow Jesus.

God set the stars to give light to the world; the star of my life is Jesus.

In him there is no darkness at all; the night and the day are both alike.

The Lamb is the light of the city of God: Shine in my heart, Lord Jesus.

I want to see the brightness of God; I want to look at Jesus.

Clear Sun of righteousness, shine on my path, and show me the way to the Father.

I’m looking for the coming of Christ; I want to be with Jesus.

When we have run with patience the race, we shall know the joy of Jesus.



Drawing by Kate Kostopulos

Candle Lighting Service

For the Second Sunday in Advent
December 7, 2014

(Light the first candle.)

This is the Prophet's candle.
It is the candle of hope.
People long ago hoped for a Savior.
Prophets told of God's promise
to send a Savior.

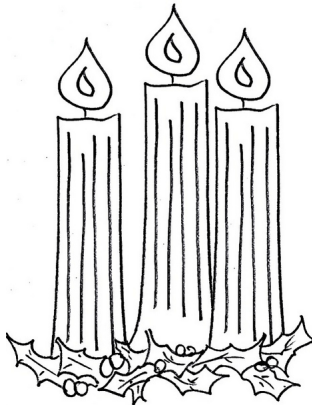
(Light the second candle.)

Let's call the second candle Mary's candle.
Mary loved God. She showed that love in all she did.
God chose Mary to be Jesus' mother.
This candle reminds us of God's love for us.

Jesus said, "Love one another even as I have loved you".

Even before Jesus was born, people knew they were supposed to love God more than anything and love other people too. But when Jesus came, he showed us what God really meant.

Lord, thank you for Jesus who showed us God's love. Help our homes and world to be filled with the same love Jesus taught and lived. Amen.



Sunday, December 7, 2014

¹The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. ² Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, ³ and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram, ⁴ and Ram the father of Ammin'adab, and Ammin'adab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon... ¹⁷ So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations.

- Matthew 1:1-4, 17

We all love a parade — the horses, the bands, the floats, the huge balloons of favorite characters, and then at the very end — what we have all been waiting for—the champion float, or if we're talking Macy's—it's Santa. It's the way *Matthew* opens the first page of the *Gospels*, with a parade of characters from the past, climaxing with the birth of the one Israel had been waiting for for two thousand years.

This cast from the past certainly includes some “characters”. Throughout 42 generations God had used some very strange ways in this royal family. Judah treated Tamar as a prostitute, Boaz was the son of Rahab, a real prostitute, and Solomon was conceived by the adulterous actions of David. All of this to say, God certainly works through ways we might not ever think could produce a good result. And now, God is about to do the most surprising, miraculous thing. As we wait for the birth of Jesus let's remember that God worked through two thousand years to fulfill God's promises and God's purposes, and God continues to work in the same way today.

As we learn to trust in our creator, God will continue to work in surprising ways to continue God's purposes and promises right in the middle of our lives.

– Rev. Belinda Price

Monday, December 8, 2014

...and she wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

- Luke 2:7b

This verse shows me how well Joseph and Mary handled the unexpected. After a long day traveling by donkey in a strange place with no preparations, family, or items to prepare for birth, Mary proceeded and gave birth to Jesus. Mary may not have expected to give birth to Jesus during the brief time she and Joseph were away, but the unexpected happened anyway.

Joseph helped deliver Jesus and tended to Mary's needs, keeping both mother and child protected and well taken care of. I imagine Joseph cleaned the feeding trough, gathered hay or lamb's wool to soften the bottom of the manger, and placed the manger in the safest place so his beloved could sleep peacefully and safely. He then placed his newborn wrapped in cloths to keep him warm in the rough manger. They did the best for Jesus without worry but with joyfulness and gratitude.

Although Mary and Joseph didn't welcome their baby with a new outfit and booties, they didn't gaze upon their new baby with disappointment either. They didn't think for a moment, "This isn't the way we pictured the birth of our son," or "This isn't how we imagined it." Instead they simply took joy in the unexpected and did the best with what they had.

Unexpected trials are a universal aspect of everyone's life – be it tornados, as in the case of our neighbors in Vilonia, or childbirth as with Mary and Joseph. Pulling through the hard times, no matter how random they are, is one of the greatest tests and triumphs within one's faith.

– Shalon Bogard; Djimpe & Glason Family



Photo Credit: dreamstime.com

Tuesday, December 9, 2014

¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.

- Luke 2:12

The manger was important to the gospel writer, Luke. He mentions the manger three times. I think this is important because of the inclusion of animals in the birth of Christ. It was a very “raw” place for this baby King to be born...and would God have wanted it any other way? Probably not. How would your vision of the Christmas story be different without the stable and its creatures? Say a prayer for the pets of the community that go unwanted or are abused within their home. Also say prayers that a loving home might open its doors to one of God’s creatures.



Drawing by Turner, Jack, and Mary Hollis Harbour

Wednesday, December 10, 2014

¹ In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

- Matthew 2:1-4, 7-8

Imagine the Wise Men following that bright star through the dark and silence of the land. What awe they must have felt knowing they would find the King of the Jews who would reign forever! As this holiest of seasons nears, allow us all be to renewed in the awe and wonder of the life of this Christ child – just a tiny baby, sent to save us all! Let us step outside into the calm of a chilly night and search for that bright star; feel His presence and worship Him with our love.

– Shelley & Allen Vickers

The miracle of Christmas is even more amazing when I learn that this was a prophecy of God's 1000 to 450 years before Christ is born.

In *Micah 5:2* and *Isaiah 7:14* God speaks to the desert tribes and tells of this miracle to come; I can't even predict what next week is going to bring.

Herod is told by the wise men from the East that there's a child to be born in Bethlehem.

How fabulous is the coming of Jesus Christ to rescue me from the darkness of my negative spirit and to bring the love of God. This indeed is the greatest gift ever. Jesus' coming is still the greatest gift because it is the "gift that keeps on giving". His birth is only the beginning. His life, death and resurrection and the hope of His return are all part of the Gift of **LOVE AND HOPE.**

– Harold Beckwith

Thursday, December 11, 2014

⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

- Luke 2:8-14 NIV

One of our family's favorite holiday traditions is to gather around the television, with a big bowl of popcorn, and watch our favorite Christmas movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*. The story follows the life of George Bailey (played by Jimmy Stewart). George, who always wanted to see the world, finds himself married with children, running the modest building and loan company founded by his father in his home town of Bedford Falls. When George's Uncle Billy misplaces an \$8,000 deposit (discovered and hidden by the town scrooge, Mr. Potter), George begins to think his family would be better off with him dead, than alive. Nudged in the right direction by a gentle angel named Clarence, George comes to realize that his life has touched many people in a positive way. Transformed by this realization, George decides to return home where he finds the open arms of the many people he has impacted.

Today's scripture lesson reminds us of George's story. The shepherds, who were living out in the fields near Bethlehem, were common, hard-working folks doing a menial task. At the time, most people looked down on shepherds as poor, dirty, wanderers. Yet God chose to reveal the birth of the Savior through these common folks. At first, the shepherds were terrified. But the message of the angels, that a Savior had come for all people to bring peace to the earth, caused the shepherds to want to experience the savior and share the good news with others.

Sometimes we all feel like George Bailey or the shepherds—over-worked, under-valued, frightened, or hopeless. And while we may not all experience the presence of an angel this advent season, by sharing this story we can all still experience the joy of our Savior's birth and be transformed and empowered by His love for us.

— Debra Williams, Vince Schallenberg & Claire, Lydia, & Emily

Questions for Discussion:

1. If an angel appeared to you today would you see it?
Would you be afraid? Would you hear its message?
Would you respond?
2. If you could choose anyone to play your angel in a movie about your life, who would it be?



Friday, December 12, 2014

¹⁵ 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." ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

- Luke 2: 15-18, 20

How are we like the shepherds? Who do we tell this good news to? Do we really return to our homes glorifying and praising God for all we have seen and heard? Does our worship and witness begin and end on Sunday morning?



Drawing by August Richter

Saturday, December 13, 2014

“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”

This is a familiar hymn we often sing before advent. It is a hymn about the promised coming of Christ.

Where did the promise come from? It came from the prophet Isaiah . . . ***“Behold, a virgin will conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel”***. - Isaiah 7:14

Back in those times when Isaiah was making that promise, names given to the Sons and Daughters of Israel had very specific meanings. The meaning of Emmanuel was, and is, “God with Us”. And Christ’s birth, some 700+ years after Isaiah’s prophecy, was the promise fulfilled – and what a great promise! – to have the abiding love and presence of God with us always in our day-to-day lives. For me, that presence is The Christ – the Jesus whose birth we have the privilege of celebrating at the end of every year.

A few years ago, a friend gave me a copy of “Jesus Calling” by Sarah Young. I read a message from Jesus in the book every day. On a recent day, He told me to “strive to remain conscious of my presence, even in your busiest moments.”

So . . .when singing this meaningful hymn I am reminded of the presence of “God with me” all the time. The 7th verse of this hymn has these two lines: ***“O come, desire of nations bind, all peoples in one heart and mind.”***

I pray for that peace always.

– Kearney Dietz

Candle Lighting Service

For the Third Sunday in Advent
December 14, 2014

(Light the first candle.)

This is the Prophet's candle. It is the candle of hope -
Hope for a savior to live among us.

(Light the second candle.)

This is Mary's candle. It is the candle of love.
Mary was a loving mother. Her son, Jesus, showed
us God's love and told us to love one another.

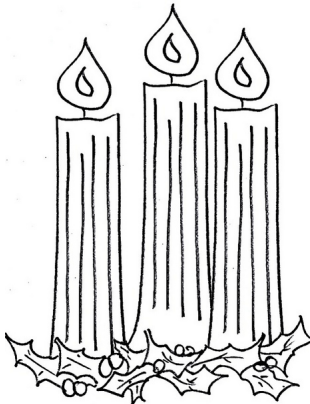
(Light the third candle.)

Let's call the third candle the Angel's candle.
The angel said to the shepherds:

**"Behold, I bring you good news of great joy which
will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in
the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord".**

Joy, that's what Christmas is about.
When we know that God loves us, joy is the
word that best tells how happy we feel!

**Lord, thank you for the joy of knowing that Jesus
can come into our lives this Christmas. Amen**



Sunday, December 14, 2014

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶ ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’” ⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”

⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

- Matthew 2: 1-12

Ever been late for a party? I have! I once heard a story about actress Anne Hathaway and her husband being invited to a party and showed up a day late. I wonder if the wise people felt this way too. We always put the “wise men” out with everything else when we look at the nativity scene – but, chances are, they were not there for the big birthday party with the angels, shepherds, and animals. However, one thing I have learned over the years is that people show up at different times to experience Jesus. You are never late to the party. When Ann Hathaway and her husband showed up – the hosts (who happened to be actor Matthew McConaughey and his wife, Camila) opened their doors, ushered them in and had their own little gathering on that Sunday afternoon. In a way, Christ does the same for us. Will you come to the party? You have been invited. Maybe even RSVP’d. But I promise, regardless of when you show up – you will be welcomed with open arms by a host that loves you very much. Merry Christmas!

– Jay, Karen, and Quin Clark

Monday, December 15, 2014

¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. ¹³ Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." ¹⁴ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son." ¹⁶ When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. ¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: ¹⁸ "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

- Matthew 2: 12-18

Today we pause to remember "the innocents." Whether the murder of the innocents actually happened historically, Mary and Joseph's reality has become a nightmare. These innocents remind us that there are still innocents in our world who are forced into being something they were not created to be by power or politics. Today – we pray for all the "innocents" who are overpowered by something more powerful than they are.



Drawing by Addie Spencer

Tuesday, December 16, 2014

What an experience it must have been for Mary to be visited by an angel! How holy the moment must have felt when she learned she would be the mother of the Son of God! Every now and then in life we have an experience that is so significant that we remember it vividly, in slow motion, in our minds forever. One such memory for me is a series of experiences from when I was pregnant with our first child, Medley. My husband Mark and I made surprise visits to both sides of the family to share the good news.

I remember how excited my side of the family was to be expecting their first grandchild and great-grandchild, and I'll never forget Mark's grandmother taking her hands off her walker and shaking them in the air in excitement when we told her. It was such a joyous day! I remember too how calming scriptures flooded my mind when I feared something was wrong during an ultrasound appointment.

"You knit me together in my mother's womb. . . I am fearfully and wonderfully made. . ." (Psalm 139:13-14) *"I know the plans I have for you . . . plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope."* (Jeremiah 29:11) I have no doubt that the recollection of these particular scriptures at that moment was the work of the great Comforter.

Several abnormalities showed up on the ultrasound that the high risk specialist performed, but he was unable to determine the cause before birth. As a result, he was unable to make predictions about chances of survival. We decided to prepare for her. One of the fabrics I chose for her room had dragonflies on it, and friends and family started buying us dragonfly things to put in her room. Before we knew it, dragonflies had unintentionally become our unborn baby's theme.

Medley lived for six days, and Mark and I learned how something could be both the most difficult thing we'd ever gone through and the biggest blessing we'd ever known. It was a holy time, a time when eternity made more sense than ever and felt perfectly real.

The day after Medley went to heaven, our yard was full of dragonflies. Other yards had some dragonflies too, but ours probably had hundreds! I kept thinking, "God has been with us through it all! Even right down to the fabric we chose to decorate her room with!" Now, every July the dragonflies are out soaring on her birthday as an annual reminder that God was and is with us through all of life!

Mary's life with Jesus must have been a magnificent experience, but not always an easy one. There must have been fears about how her pregnancy would be received. It must have been stressful to be in labor when out of town with nowhere to stay. Surely she panicked when she couldn't find her twelve-year-old boy following the festival of the Passover. How painful it must have been to watch her son be ridiculed, mocked, and crucified.

I wonder if Mary had a flashback that was her go-to memory in times such as these. Perhaps she was comforted by a vision of the angel Gabriel saying, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you. . . You have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive . . . He will be called the Son of the Most High. . . He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end. . . For nothing will be impossible with God." This Christmas season, may you remember that through the good times and the bad, the Lord is always with you!

– Rebel & Mark Wilson

Wednesday, December 17, 2014

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰ But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³ "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." ²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. ¹³ Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." ¹⁴ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

- Matthew 1: 18-25, 2:13-15

In this scripture, Joseph is facing difficult circumstances and difficult decisions. Rather than taking the easier route, Joseph listened to God, thought more about Mary and his unborn son than himself, and trusted that God was with him. Joseph was incredibly brave, unselfish and faithful to God, but he must have felt isolated, afraid and confused. But God was with Joseph, willing to walk with him, just as He is with us today as we face our own set of circumstances and feel those same ways.

Every day we are faced with problems, circumstances and decisions that are complex. It is a challenge to be selfless and remember to consider others as we make decisions. This scripture reminds us to have faith, and that God's plan and timing are perfect. By trusting that He has a plan for each of us (no matter how strange things may seem at the most trying times) more often than not, the results will help us grow into the person He created us to be.

Prayer: *God, please help us to trust you. Help us to have more faith and believe that even when we don't understand why things are happening, we can trust that Your plan is at work in our lives, and that if we continue to search for the good, it will be revealed. Amen*

— Brian Cato, Mallory Van Dover, Mason and Emma Jewell, and Mason and Nic Cato
(we call ourselves the Jan Cato family – J for Jewell, an from the Van, Cato for the Catos)

Thursday, December 18, 2014

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ²³ “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel” (which means, God with us). ²⁵ but knew her not until she had borne a son; and he called his name Jesus.

- Matthew 1:22-23, 25

⁷ And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

- Luke 2:7

What does it mean when we say, God is with us? God loves us and wants us to draw near to him. He loves us consistently. He is FAITHFUL to us and is with us every day. Our Bible tells us over and over again that God is faithful. *Deuteronomy 7:9* says, “⁹ Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments.”

How does that make us feel to know that God keeps his promises to us?

We learn that one of Jesus’ names is **Immanuel** from *Matthew 1:22-23*; how amazing is it that Jesus’ very name means “God with us?” He came to this earth, was born a really humble birth in a manger, because no one had room for His parents in the inn. All of the prophets in the Bible had promised us that Jesus would come all throughout the Old Testament; God had a covenant with us. God kept His promise to us by sending Jesus.

Jesus is the ultimate gift that points to God’s love for us. Jesus spent His whole life telling people about His father in heaven and God’s faithfulness to us. Focusing on how much Jesus loves us and has provided for us in every way helps us be mindful of His love for us. That focus on God’s faithfulness is so different than focusing on presents, food, decorations, or time off school. We focus on getting our hearts ready for Jesus’ birth.

Take time as a family to draw a picture at the bottom of the page or write a list of things that remind you of how FAITHFUL God is to us. He keeps His promises. No wonder the angels sang loud songs, the wise men brought gold, and the shepherds walked for miles to see Him! Hang the picture or list on your tree or in your room to remind yourself of how Jesus is our Immanuel, or “God with us.”

– Stephen, Allison, Thomas, and Anne Elizabeth Hester

Friday, December 19, 2014

Readings: *Isaiah 42:14-16 and John 1:1-5, 14*

Wait.

But WHY?

Because I gave you my word.

It sounds better than saying “because I said so” but it means the same thing, right?

Advent is a time of waiting. My kids all have birthdays leading up to and just after Christmas. Christmas and birthdays all at the same time! Around our house there is a lot of waiting to be done and sometimes not everyone understands why we have to wait. And there is a lot of impatience, both on their parts, and on mine, just to try to get everything done and wanting things done according to MY plan. There is also a lot of “hurry up!” Everything and everyone is in a hurry. In a hurry to wait. To wait in line, to wait at an appointment, to wait your turn, to wait for something to come, to wait for someONE to come, waiting for the perfect moment—why are we hurrying around just so we can wait? And then we complain about waiting because we have to hurry up to go wait somewhere else.

Hurry up and waiting do not belong together. “I will not forsake them.” But they—I mean WE—don’t always believe that. But I gave you my word, my promise, my “I said so.” And we still do not always believe it will be so: that eventually it all will happen as it should. There should be a clearer path, more direction, more knowing, and less waiting, right? Maybe it won’t be anything like what you knew before, or what you wanted or expected to happen, but Christ will come, because He said so. God does not forsake us. He told the Israelites they would be delivered—literally re-born, as in childbirth. And it’s not just the Israelites, but everyone of the earth. There is a path made, and all that you expected and knew before will become changed; and the path you needed will be laid out before you and made clear, and you will have understanding and light where there was darkness.

And that takes patience. Patience is faith—believing it will BE so because God SAID so. We must learn patience because it will all happen. On God’s time it will happen. We do have His WORD, after all. He will not forsake us. He did not forsake us. He gave us His WORD: the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Then it happened that all of our hurry and waiting and patience and faith would be answered. He gave us His WORD. Christ is the Word made flesh. He is the promise of God and we are delivered and changed because God said so. ***He gave us his word.***

Prayer: *Dear God, thank you for your promise. Thank you for giving us your WORD. Alleluia and AMEN!*

– Melissa Brown

Saturday, December 20, 2014

*What child is this, who, laid to rest, On Mary's lap is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet, While shepherds watch are keeping?
This, this is Christ the King, Whom shepherds guard and angels sing:
Haste, haste to bring Him laud, The babe, the son of Mary.*

*Why lies He in such mean estate, Where ox and donkeys are feeding?
Good Christians, fear, for sinners here The silent Word is pleading.
Nails, spear shall pierce Him through, the cross be borne for me, for you.
Hail, hail the Word made flesh, the Babe, the Son of Mary.*

*So bring him incense, gold, and myrrh, Come, peasant, king, to own him.
The King of kings salvation brings, Let loving hearts enthrone him.
Raise, raise a song on high, The virgin sings her lullaby
Joy, joy for Christ is born, The babe, the Son of Mary*

This is one of our favorite hymns to sing during the Christmas season. The lyrics were written by William Dix in the late 1800's. Dix wrote these beautiful lyrics after being stricken with illness and depression at age 26 and reaching out to God for spiritual healing. Obviously, we know the answer to the question posed in the hymn...What Child is This?...it is Jesus Christ, the son of God and our savior.

Mostly, we think of this song around Christmas because it celebrates the birth of Jesus from the Virgin Mary. It describes the Nativity ("Why lies He in such mean estate, where ox and donkeys are feeding?") with angels singing, shepherds guarding the King of Kings, and the wise men bringing gifts of "incense, gold and myrrh".

"Hail, hail the word made flesh" indicates that the Lord, in all his divine power and grace, is embodied in human form by His son, Jesus Christ. This must have been difficult, in the moment, to comprehend for those who came to see the child in such humble surroundings. But, "Good Christians" had faith in the word of God ("The silent Word is pleading").

While most of us can easily recite the opening stanza of the song, it is the lesser known lines in the hymn that truly speak to the gift bestowed on us from God through the birth and crucifixion of Jesus: "Nails, spear shall pierce Him through" and later "The King of Kings salvation brings". Here, even as Jesus has just been born, God tells us that Jesus will die for our sins so that those who believe in Him, rich or poor will be redeemed with everlasting life.

"What Child is This" is an enduring, wonderful hymn we sing at Christmas chronicling the life of Jesus Christ from birth to crucifixion, while reminding us of the greatest gift of all... the forgiveness of our sins.

— Greg, Kathleen, Walker, & Warren Heird

Candle Lighting Service

For The Fourth Sunday in Advent
December 21, 2014

(Light the first candle.)

This is the Prophet's candle. This candle reminds us of God's promise to send Jesus, our Savior.

(Light the second candle.)

This is Mary's candle. It is the candle of love. It reminds us of God's love for us and that we should love others.

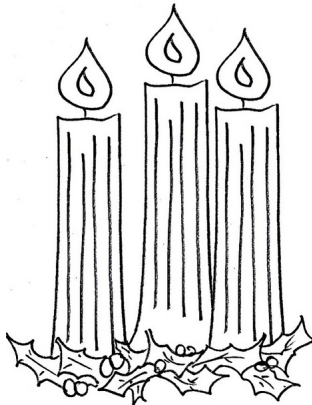
(Light the third candle.)

This is the Angel's candle. It is the candle of joy. It reminds us of the joy Jesus brought to the world.

(Light the fourth candle.)

Let's call this the Wise Men's candle. The wise men brought gifts to Jesus. This candle calls us to give too – give our hearts to Jesus and our lives by helping others as he did.

Lord, thank you for all the gifts you give us – a beautiful world, ourselves, families, and friends. But the best gift of all is Jesus. Amen.



Sunday, December 21, 2014

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

– John 1: 1-14

In my beginning was me, I was for Christmas and Christmas was for me!

I am an only child. I loved Christmas, and I loved presents. I loved being spoiled.

Then I got married and had children. When our children were born I found new meaning, new identity, and new purpose. It was no longer about me; I now experience such joy through my children's Christmas joy. In this new identity, I began to question our motives for Christmas. It was now about seeing and finding joy in others instead of myself. Buying a water buffalo through the Heifer Foundation in honor of my family members benefiting someone in need somewhere in the world meant so much more than giving them a silly trinket they didn't need or want.

I began to realize when the Christ child was born I was given...TRUE meaning...TRUE identity...TRUE purpose. This Word brought grace and truth. This True Light conquered the darkness. Without this Word not one thing came into being; with this Word we have all come into new being. The birth of the Messiah means the birth of our new self, our true self, our God-intended self, our child of God self.

Did you know you are a cherished child of God? You are! Did you know this gift of Grace and Truth was given for you? It was! If your Gift is still wrapped, unwrap it right away! Do you know someone who needs help unwrapping their Present? Help them right away. In the beginning was the Word, the Word was God, and the Word came for you!

Prayer: *Loving God, I pray that I will always remember my identity as Your child is found in You and not in me. I pray that Your True Gift might be realized by someone who hasn't yet unwrapped it. I pray that maybe I could be the person who carries Your True Light into some dark place in our community in great need of this Light. Help me to share Your Light. Amen*

– Rev. Jacob Lynn

Monday, December 22, 2014

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty one has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

- Luke 1:46-56

Mary is having a baby. She goes to see her cousin Elizabeth who is also having a baby. When Elizabeth praises Mary for her faith Mary responds with the beautiful words above from *Luke 1:46-56*. Read these verses again from Luke but this time imagine you are Mary. Reading these words what do you sense from Mary?

Mary's song in these verses 46-55 in the first chapter of *Luke* is also called the *Magnificat*. This hymn of praise by Mary has inspired many composers and artists over the centuries – and still does today – to create and compose incredible works of art and music. What do you find most inspiring from Mary's song?

Look again at verses 46 and 47, "*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.*" Mary, the mother of Jesus, began her song of praise and adoration in a way that still speaks so clearly to us in 2014. What was in her heart over two thousand years ago can be in our hearts today! And every day!

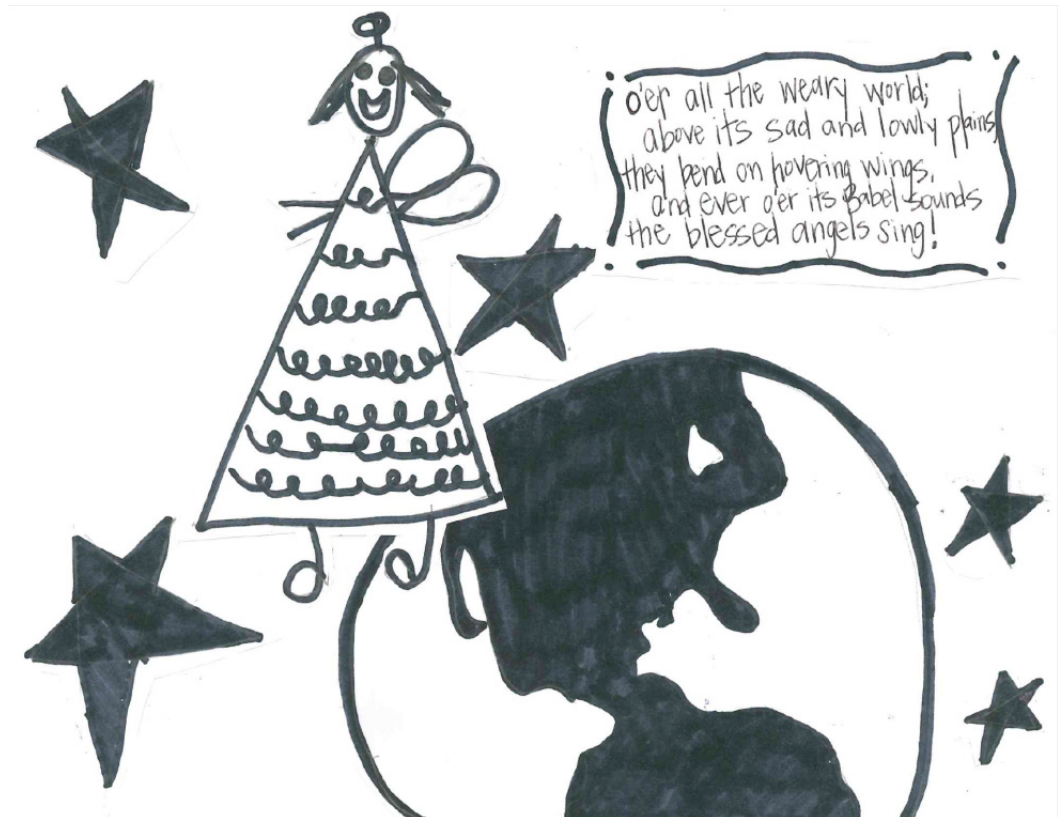
May Mary's faith and Mary's song be in our hearts this Christmas season and always, as we not only find room for the newborn baby Jesus in our hearts, but also that our souls and spirits will magnify and rejoice in God's eternal love.

Today. Tomorrow. Always. Amen.

– Cindy Burns

Tuesday, December 23, 2014

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



Drawing by the Turner Family: Douglas & Alan, Bo, Whit & Reaves

Wednesday, December 24, 2014

...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."

- Luke 2:1-20

The Christmas story, according to St. Luke, has to be one of the most familiar of all the stories in the Bible. Our earliest memories of it may be visualized in pageant form – children in bath robes...animals...a Mary, a Joseph, and a baby or doll, several shepherds, and angels – lots and lots of angels. This beloved story is so familiar that it may be difficult to hear or see anything new or fresh or relevant for our lives today.

As I reread it in preparation for this devotion, I discovered something new to think about. (It's always a danger to admit something like this. You run the risk of a whole congregation of people thinking, "Oh *really!* I thought of that a long time ago!") I'm going to be brave and share my insight with you: those shepherds were an incredible example for all of us! In just six short verses, after the angels left, Luke tells us that the shepherds made a momentous decision.

Picture it. The glorious announcement from the angels was over. The brilliant light that filled the skies with the heavenly host grew dim. The angels left the center stage and the shepherds were left. What if they had just said, "Wow, how about those angels! Beautiful show up there. But it's back to work now." But thankfully they didn't. When the angels left so long ago, 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."

And our story in Luke tells that they did just that, leaving the fields to seek that baby in the manger. A devil's advocate might ask at this point, "What difference did their going to Bethlehem make?" Well, for one thing – just think of the news that they brought to those young parents! But there is something else extraordinary about the shepherds going to Bethlehem! It changed their lives! After they had seen the baby, Luke tells us, "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen." After the angels left, they were just a motley band of common laborers! But when they returned from Bethlehem, they were new people – people who glorified and praised God.

This year, on Christmas Eve, we will hear the announcement of the angels once more. Will we follow the shepherds to the manger? Or will we stop short of Bethlehem? Stop with the warm, fuzzy feelings? Or will it end with a sacred moment, with our going to see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us? ***Will you go to look for the Christ child?***

– Rev. Lynn Lindsey

Candle Lighting Service

For Christmas Day
December 25, 2014

Today we light all the candles in our Advent wreath to celebrate Jesus' birth.

(Light the first candle.)

This candle reminds us of God's promise to send Jesus, our Savior.

(Light the second candle.)

This candle reminds us of God's love for us and that we should love others.

(Light the third candle.)

This candle reminds us of the joy Jesus brought to the world.

(Light the fourth candle.)

This candle reminds us of the giving part of Christmas.

(Light the Christmas candle.)

**We light this candle as we celebrate Christmas Day.
God, we are glad you sent Jesus.
Teach us to love and care as he did. Amen**



Photo Credit: clipartpanda.com

Thursday, December 25, 2014

*While shepherds kept their watching, Over silent flocks by night,
Behold throughout the heavens, There shone a holy light:
Go, Tell It On The Mountain, Over the hills and everywhere;
Go, Tell It On The Mountain That Jesus Christ is born.*

*When I am a seeker, I seek both night and day;
I seek the Lord to help me, And He shows me the way:
Go, Tell It On The Mountain, Over the hills and everywhere;
Go, Tell It On The Mountain That Jesus Christ is born.*

What? No! Are you kidding me? Christmas decorations are on display by the Halloween jack-o-lantern?! I'm annoyed and dismayed? I am already feeling rushed and stressed. I am already teaching my 1st and 2nd grade students the songs for our holiday musical? How can this be? I have already forgotten the reason for the season.

Stop Kayren, stop and listen. Their little voices are glorious singing the jazz gospel song "Christmas Jubilation" and the African America spiritual "Go Tell It on the Mountain".

"Christmas jubilation! Shine, shine the light of glory. Its' a celebration, everybody sing."

"With the angels, shout it from the mountains. Alleluia, make a joyful sound!"

"From the mountains sing! To the valley sing!"

"Go tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ is born!"

Stop and reflect on the real reason for this glorious season. Think of that little baby who brings good news of happiness, who publishes peace and brings goodness.

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings goodness, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, "your god reigns".

- Isaiah 52:7

Prayer: *Go tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born! Thank you God for your son, "Jesus Christ". Amen*

– Kayren Baker

Friday, December 26, 2014

⁸ Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

⁵⁴ When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." ⁵⁷ At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸ dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

- Acts 6:8-10; 7:54-59

"...Let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself..."

— Franklin Delano Roosevelt

When I was a child I was scared of the dark. Well, I wasn't really scared of the dark, but of what was in the dark. My mom loved old scary movies so I got my share of dudes in hockey masks, dudes with four inch blades for fingers, and dudes that chased you with chainsaws. Needless to say, whenever I walked outside after sunset or was home alone after dark, these guys were always there to keep me company.

We had a large field behind my childhood house. One summer, my siblings and friends and I were all convinced that a vampire lived in this house. We staked it out every day trying to find some clues. I wanted to see a coffin, bat droppings, anything. Each day we went searching for clues...nothing. One day my buddy double dog dared me to throw a stick and hit the house. As I thought of all the bad things that could happen to me if the vampire found out, my buddies and siblings began to mock me and call me chicken. Being the macho leader of this group, there was no way I would not call the dare. As soon as the stick shattered the glass, we ran faster than I ever imagined possible. Usain Bolt couldn't have caught me that day.

We ran in the house, into my bedroom and slammed the door. Completely stunned and out of breath we all looked at each other and without saying a word cemented a plan that not one word of this would ever pass our lips. A few days later when my brother got mad at me for some stupid reason I'm sure, he squealed on me. I had to come clean to my mom and tell her why I HAD to throw the stick. She of course punished me and let me in on a little secret. There are no vampires! It took me a while to get over the vampire that lived out behind our house but eventually time passed, as did my fear and ignorance.

Friday, December 26, 2014 (continued)

The story of Stephen in Acts reminds me of this summer. Steven was a great teacher in the Jewish community. As Steven went out to the people he began teaching them about Jesus. The Jews in the area in which Steven was spreading the Gospel of Jesus still followed the old law. The people believed that this Jesus of whom Stephen spoke, was trying to change the customs that Moses handed down to them from God (*Acts 6:11*). Out of fear and ignorance, the people of Jerusalem brought Stephen before the court and falsely accused him of being a blasphemer, a liar, the “vampire out back”. Stephen was a gifted speaker but nothing he said was going to change their minds. He double dog dared them to believe in the One. This infuriated the people. They had had enough. They dragged Stephen to the edge of the city and stoned him (*Acts 7:60*). Fear and ignorance strikes again.

Often as I read the paper or watch the news I am reminded of just how dangerous being different can be. Whether you encounter an impoverished minority from Ferguson, Missouri, a Muslim on an airplane, a disciple of Christ, or a vampire out back, please ask God to give you the wisdom to handle these situations with the grace and humbleness of Stephen. Do not let fear and arrogance strike again.

– Rocky & Jenni Goodman
– Blake & Phillip Abston

Saturday, December 27, 2014

¹ We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life — ² this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us — ³ we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. ⁴ We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

- 1 John 1:1-4



¹ That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.

John 1:1-4

Drawing by Sybil Curran

Sunday, December 28, 2014

⁵ *This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.* ⁶ *If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true;* ⁷ *but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.* ⁸ *If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.* ⁹ *If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* ¹⁰ *If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.*

¹ *My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous;* ² *and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.*

- 1 John: 1:5-10; 2:1-2

My favorite time every year during the Advent season comes on Christmas Eve. It is the end of the Christmas Eve service when all the lights go down, making the sanctuary darker than we ever see it the rest of the year, leaving only the candles of the Advent wreath and the candles on the altar for light. The ministers light their own candles from these candles, and then pass the light to the ushers, who in turn pass the light to the congregation. We pass the light to one another, and as the light grows, the tune of "Silent Night, Holy Night" plays, and we join in to sing the familiar carol. During these moments, my heart swells as the room goes from darkness to light, from silence to being surrounded by the music of our voices joining together. It is divine to watch the light of God grow from a few small flames to a glow of hundreds of candles as we spread the light of God in fellowship with one another.

In November and December, as the Advent season begins, the days get shorter and the nights get longer. Like the sanctuary on Christmas Eve with the lights lowered, it is darker than it is the rest of the year as I leave work to tackle the day's errands, family commitments, or other events.

Years ago, the wise men were also in the darkness when they were led by the light of the star to Jesus. Likewise, the angel of the Lord shone around the shepherds watching their flocks in the darkness of night. Today, we can find God's light in the darkness in candles on Advent wreaths, in lights on Christmas trees, in the glow of the candles in the Christmas Eve service, and in fellowship with one another as we pray together, serve others together, worship together, and sing the familiar tune:

*Silent night, Holy night
Son of God, love's pure light
Radiant beams from thy holy face
With the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord at thy birth
Jesus, Lord at thy birth*

– Jamie Demspey

Monday, December 29, 2014

³ We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands. ⁴ Whoever says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person. ⁵ But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him: ⁶ Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did. ⁷ Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning. This old command is the message you have heard. ⁸ Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and in you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining. ⁹ Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a brother or sister is still in the darkness. ¹⁰ Anyone who loves their brother and sister lives in the light, and there is nothing in them to make them stumble. ¹¹ But anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness. They do not know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded them.

- 1 John 2: 3-11

We are all liars. In some way, shape, or form, we have not done what God has commanded us to do. It's rough to come to that realization. We go to church, we pray, we take communion, and yet we all know we do not always live as Christ did. We have failed. We are liars. But, we have a way to move from the darkness back into the light. It seems simple, but we must love rather than hate. God already knows we are capable of this – "its truth is seen in Him and in you." We were made in the image of God, so why do we not love as Christ loves? All it takes to step into the light fully is to love each other, not because we must, but because we should want to. It should feel as natural as breathing. Unfortunately, it is not that easy for us, including myself, so we have to continue to strive to be not the best Christian we can be, but the best brother or sister we can be to all.

– Walker Hawkins

Tuesday, December 30, 2014

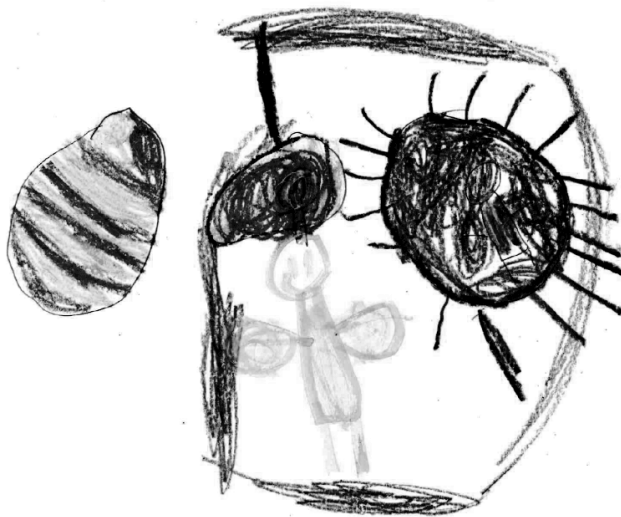
¹² I remind you, my dear children: Your sins are forgiven in Jesus' name. ¹³ You veterans were in on the ground floor, and know the One who started all this; you newcomers have won a big victory over the Evil One. ¹⁴ You veterans know the One who started it all; and you newcomers - such vitality and strength! God's word is so steady in you. Your fellowship with God enables you to gain a victory over the Evil One. ¹⁵ Don't love the world's ways. Don't love the world's goods. Love of the world squeezes out love for the Father. ¹⁶ Practically everything that goes on in the world - wanting your own way, wanting everything for yourself, wanting to appear important - has nothing to do with the Father. It just isolates you from him. ¹⁷ The world and all its wanting, wanting, wanting is on the way out - but whoever does what God wants is set for eternity.

- 1 John 2:12-17

Choices...do we choose the world or God? It's the most important choice we can make in our lives. The world is the easy choice. We can have a merry time partying, spending money on all of our wants. It has a way of making us forget our problems, or so we think, temporally. But the problems don't go away. Having faith in the God of hope, the hope we find in baby Jesus, that's what really gets us through the hard times. At this time of the year we need to embrace the God of hope and his son Jesus! Focus on them and we can't go wrong. He is the eternal One who lives in our hearts and brings us the peace and joy we need. Make the right choice! Choose God!

Prayer: God of hope, thank you for sending your Son to us! Help us to make the best choice we can...YOU! Amen

- Cathy and John Engle



Drawing by Christian Lopez

Wednesday, December 31, 2014

“Joy to the world, the Lord has come! Let earth receive her King! Let every heart prepare Him room and heaven and nature sing!”

The shepherds were keeping watch over their flock by night and the Angel of the Lord appeared before them “Do not be afraid, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” Suddenly a multitude of heavenly host appeared praising God “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among men.”

The shepherds said to one another “Let’s go see this thing that has come to pass!” God sent His Son to take away our sin, to show us how to love our Father and how to love each other! Let each of us make room in our hearts for our Savior! Let Him be the center of our lives and go to Him with every question and with every circumstance we encounter. For He rules the world with truth and grace so that no more will sin and sorrow grow. Let us too go and see this Wonder which has taken place and be a part of the glories of His righteousness and the wonders of His love. Thanks be to God!

– Jimmy Faulkner

Thursday, January 1, 2015

¹² As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³ Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

- Colossians 3:12-15

There's nothing more magical than waking up on Christmas morning to a fresh blanket of crisp, white snow. Having lived in the South for most of my life, I've only experienced Christmas snow a handful of times, but it makes everything suddenly seem clean, new, innocent, quiet. On a backdrop of freshly fallen snow it's hard to believe anyone could be unhappy or hateful, lonely or hurt. New snow is like a clean slate for the dull of winter.

I don't know if there was snow on the first Christmas morning—maybe not—but I wonder if in some way the people who were present at or shortly after Jesus' birth had that same feeling. Did they know that this tiny baby would change the world? Could they imagine that because of this infant, the whole world would be given a chance at change? That the tiny voice that wailed in the quiet of a stable would eventually speak words of authority and power, kindness and love? Did they know that because of this helpless little child we would all have a chance at new life?

The entire 3rd chapter of Colossians gives us a glimpse of the change that is available to all people through Christ. In Jesus, the Creator God intersects in the most practical and relatable way with his creation. The forgiving, renewing, relentless Love that culminates on the cross and in the empty tomb comes to us first in the form of a dependent, helpless baby. Because of this baby we no longer have to struggle through life on our own, fighting the battles that the world would call us to. We no longer have to be angry, self-righteous, self-indulgent, unforgiving. Christ's birth doesn't signify a "do-over." It means having the freedom to love that we would not have without Jesus. We can now love God properly, as well as others—we can even love ourselves. Like a freshly-fallen blanket of snow, Christ's arrival on earth signifies a blank slate for all of us. Without this promise of new life, Christmas would mean nothing.

– Brandon, Jennie, and Clarke Williams


Questions for Discussion:

1. So how has the reality of this God-child impacted us?
2. Can you think of specific ways that your faith in God has changed you or continues to change you?
3. We can usually identify the ways that God has impacted our lives from the outside, but can we think of ways that Christ has changed the way we live?
4. As Advent draws to a close, what are some ways in which you can intentionally recognize and say thanks for Christ's impact on the way you live your life?

Friday, January 2, 2015

Read *James 4: 1-10* and think about what you need to get serious about in your life with Christ. Focus on saying a "quiet yes to God" and make changes that will help make you who God has created you to be...after all, it is a new year!

James 4: 1-10

keep  your

heart + clean

Emmy S

Biblical interpretation by Emmy Smith

Saturday, January 3, 2015

¹¹ Don't bad-mouth each other, friends. It's God's Word, his Message, his Royal Rule, that takes a beating in that kind of talk. You're supposed to be honoring the Message, not writing graffiti all over it. ¹² God is in charge of deciding human destiny. Who do you think you are to meddle in the destiny of others? ¹³ And now I have a word for you who brashly announce, "Today - at the latest, tomorrow - we're off to such and such a city for the year. We're going to start a business and make a lot of money." ¹⁴ You don't know the first thing about tomorrow. You're nothing but a wisp of fog, catching a brief bit of sun before disappearing. ¹⁵ Instead, make it a habit to say, "If the Master wills it and we're still alive, we'll do this or that." ¹⁶ As it is, you are full of your grandiose selves. All such vaunting self-importance is evil. ¹⁷ In fact, if you know the right thing to do and don't do it, that, for you, is evil.

- James 4: 11-17

Today's society has taught us we must always be reaching and searching for bigger and better opportunities. We read self-help books and go to seminars on how to be more efficient in reaching our next big break. We write down our goals and repeat them in the hopes that one day we will finally enjoy the fruits of our labor. Essentially, we spend each day planning for the next. Why should we always be planning for the future when the only thing that is certain is today? For James reminds us that our lives are but mists that vanish after only a short time.

We should break this cycle. Instead of spending today planning for tomorrow, let's begin spending today serving God. This doesn't necessarily mean giving your personal testimony to a stranger. Serving God can be as simple as holding the door for a coworker, being kind to the cashier at the grocery, or showing love to a friend that is struggling. God's love can be expressed through what you decide to do today. Therefore, join us now in searching for opportunities to show God's love to our brothers and sisters in Christ, for we know how quickly a mist vanishes.

- Megan and Ben Rugg

Sunday, January 4, 2015

“All you need is love.” These five short words were made famous by The Beatles, and over the past three months of my life, I have discovered their utmost truth. As a teacher in a public school in a small town in Eastern North Carolina, the state tells me my job is to teach my students math. However, God has told me that my job is to first and foremost love my students and then get to the math. After reading *Luke 6:27-31*, the first thing that came to my mind was my students. That makes me sound like I view my students as my enemies, and I absolutely do not! What triggered that thought was simply the need to love others. I am surrounded by students each day who are not loved at home. They don’t have parental figures in their lives who love them the way they deserve to be loved. One of the biggest lessons that teaching has taught me is to ALWAYS show love to each student, or person, you encounter during the day because you may be the only love they receive that day. Read that again. By saying hello and smiling at a person as you walk by them on the way to the office or to class, you may be giving that person the ONLY love he or she will receive the entire day. How powerful is that?

Whether or not a person is your best friend, your mortal enemy, or a total stranger, that person deserves to be loved. We, as children of God, are here to love one another. When Jesus came to this Earth and was asked what the greatest commandment was, he said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depends all the Law and the Prophets.” (*Matthew 22:37-40*) The two greatest commandments, on which ALL of the other laws depend, are about love. We must first love the Lord and then love our neighbor. What kind of god makes his people love as the most important rule? Well, that would be our God, our God who gives each of us exactly what we do not deserve: grace.

Our God loves each and every one of us UNCONDITIONALLY. He loves the people who hate him. He loves the people who ignore him. He loves the people who have never heard of him. He loves the people who speak against him. He loves the people who go to him only when it benefits them. Finally, He loves the people who love him. The catch to all of those statements is that he loves all of those people equally. He loves you just as much as he loves the leaders of ISIS. He loves the preacher just as much as he loves the atheist. My challenge for you and for me this advent season is to be able to say the following: I love the people who hate me. I love the people who ignore me. I love the people who have never heard of me. I love the people who speak against me. I love the people who go to me only when it benefits them. Finally, I love the people who love me, and I love these people all the same.

The world would look incredibly different if we, the members of God’s holy church, loved the way Jesus taught us to love (unconditionally) and if we loved the people he commanded us to love (everyone). So let us pray for strength and courage to love every person we encounter so that we may fulfill our Lord’s greatest commandments. Amen.

– Rachel Garrett

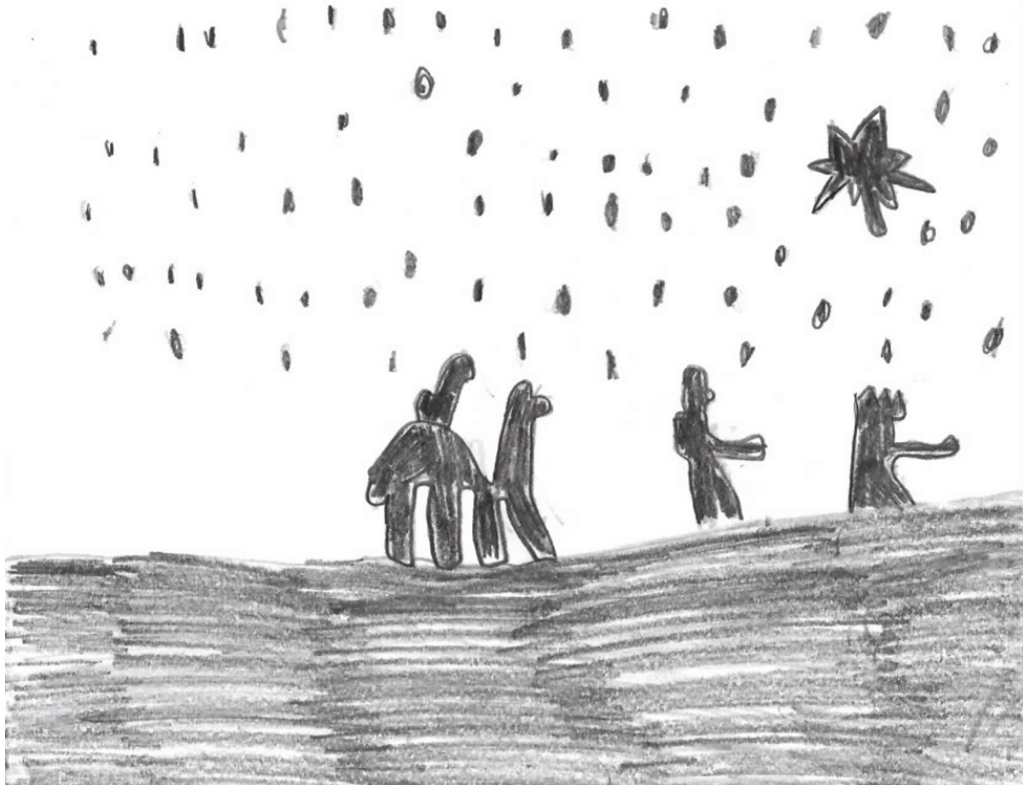
Monday, January 5, 2015

We Three Kings

Jan 5, 2015

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem, a star appeared in the East to three Wise Men, announcing the King of the Jews birth. They followed the star and went to Bethlehem to worship him. They began asking and looking around to find the new Messiah. The star appeared once again, the same star they had seen in the eastern skies and it hovered over the place of the child. They were so excited! They went into the house and saw Jesus with his mother, Mary. They bowed down and worshiped him. Then, the three Wise Men opened their treasures and presented their gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

When we search for God with heartfelt determination, we will find him. He is not hiding from us, but wants to know and have a relationship with each of us.



Drawing by Joey & Amanda Scott; Anna Claire, Ella & Emma

Tuesday, January 6, 2015

Epiphany of the Lord

Theme: Ministry to outsiders

... the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power.

- Ephesians 3:6-7

I love the season of Epiphany, meaning manifestation or revelation. Epiphany is the season of the Christian Year following Advent and Christmas that focuses on the Gospel (Good News) of Jesus Christ for the whole world. An epiphany is a new realization, when the light comes on, and we get it!

Epiphany is the season of the Magi, gentile astrologers, who sensed that a celestial light signaled something of earthly significance and traveled to Bethlehem to investigate and worship. Epiphany tells of the Baptism of the Lord and celebrates our own. Epiphany shares the beginning of Jesus' ministry and the call of his disciples. Epiphany proclaims the Good News of Jesus for all people, a ministry to which the Apostle Paul believed himself to be uniquely called, as indicated in our text from Ephesians, and results in the expansion of the church throughout the world. Most of us are products of Paul's epiphany and resulting ministry.

Epiphany refocuses followers of Jesus from our selves, our church, our community, our nation to the world and other people whom God also loves, just as Paul did. Epiphany enlightens our understanding of God and broadens our ministry to include those who are not members, who may not look like us, speak the same language or hold the same beliefs and values. Epiphany broadens our perspective on God's love and stretches our own love to include those unlike us. Epiphany is the Light of God's grace that shines in the world's darkness to illumine the pathway of love for all people, just like Jesus.

Thanks be to God!

— Rev. Vic Nixon, Pastor Emeritus



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