

**December 24**

Ah, there's nothing like a baby!

What a blessing and a privilege it has been for me to receive a God-given call to help bring new life into this world. Fortunately, the vast majority of times birth is truly a joyous occasion and I have shed many happy tears with parents as they welcome their new little ones into this world. However, there are also times when I have (privately) shed tears of sadness and concern – such as when a new mother not only wouldn't touch her baby, she wouldn't even look at it as she had not brought forth a culturally-preferred male child.

Though most babies are wanted and eagerly anticipated, some are born to a woman who is alone and has no one else even with her in the delivery room. Some are unwanted. Some are born into wealth, others poverty. Some start their life with seeming difficulties: challenging birth defects, pain, addiction.

Yet every time I see and hold a newborn, that little wrinkly, wet, blinking, frowning, crying, utterly bewildered little miracle, I say a prayer and wonder what potential lies within, and what will become of this new little child of God. Will this innocent one, as yet uncorrupted by earthly influences or woes, later thrive, or succumb to difficulties; be productive, or a burden; bring joy, or sadness; be good, or evil?

The potential, and the parental hope for a newborn are endless, yet the future is unknown. Mary knew that her child, even more than all others, was special. Yet did she truly know just how special? Did she know that her hope, her child, truly *the* child of God, would become the embodiment of love, God incarnate, the hope of the world?

Thanks be to God for this child, for this baby like no other.

Ah, there's nothing like this baby!

**Lenita Thibault**

## **Introduction**

*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?  
How long will you hide your face from me?  
—Psalm 13:1*

Greetings and peace in the name of our Lord, Jesus the Christ! I am sure you will be pleased, as I am, with this year's Advent devotional. The team that put it together has worked really hard, as have all those who contributed. We do hope that it will be a blessing to you.

To open, I want to introduce you to the question that lay beneath all our Advent celebrations. Please note: Advent isn't Christmas – not yet, anyway. Advent, by definition, is a season of waiting and watching for the coming of the Lord Jesus. That means that Advent is about preparing ourselves for the fulfillment of all God's promises in the Lord.

And so, if Advent is about waiting, watching, and preparing for the coming of the Lord Jesus, then we must be waiting, watching, and preparing for him to come and do something. That something is to be God with us. His coming is closing of the long night of history when, in our suffering, we longed for God's presence, redemption, and salvation.

This is exactly where we must hear the Psalmist in the opening line of Psalm 13. Here at the outset, David cries out what we have all cried out at one time or another: "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" We are all challenged. We all suffer. We all long for the love of God to surround us in our sorrow.

And that is who Jesus is: God's answer, spoken to each of us, where we are. God is not far off. Advent teaches us, if anything, that our waiting, watching, and preparations are never in vain. In Jesus, we have God's promised "Yes." (2 Cor. 1:20)

In Christ,  
**Pastor Sam**

## November 28

One of the things my family loves about Advent are the carols we sing to celebrate the coming of Jesus. Some favorites include...

**Silent Night**, holy night.  
Shepherds quake at the sight.  
Glories stream from heaven afar.  
Heavenly hosts sing Alleluia...

**Oh Holy Night**, the stars are brightly shining  
It is the night of the dear Savior's birth  
Long lay the world in sin and error pining  
'Til He appears and the soul felt it's worth...

There are so many outstanding Christmas carols, all songs of praise. It just seems natural to sing about Jesus and to praise God -- like the angels and the shepherds. It's what all God's children do, isn't it? It's as automatic and life-sustaining as breathing. Our bodies are designed to breathe in, and if we breathe in we are naturally going to breathe out. We cannot do one without the other for very long.

When we sing carols during Advent, we are showing our love for God. But that is only the first part of our function as children of God. Remember Jesus' words, "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: Love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22: 36-38)

Two parts. If we do the first, we will naturally do the second. Without one, we cannot do the other the way God intended.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are enabled to love and praise our Father in Heaven, and by that same power, we are enabled to serve our neighbor.

*Dear God, thank you for your Son Jesus. Thank you for the Christmas carols that help us to praise you. Open my heart and my eyes to see the neighbor YOU would like me to love in a special way right now.*

**Peggy Hill**

## December 23

Lately, while reading about giving and parenting (some for pleasure, others more for need), an idea that keeps resurfacing is that of being stewards of God's creation. My money is not my own, everything we have in life is an act of grace given by God, and he has made us stewards of these gifts. They are not to be hoarded or sit unused as in Matthew 25, but to be put to work for the good of the kingdom, for the Master's glory. I think the same idea follows with our children. My kids are not my own, I have been made a steward for my little time on earth.

In this season I cannot help but think about the stewardship Mary was given. An unwed teenager who was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit to give birth to the Son of God, the one who would be called Immanuel, and save His people from their sins. Can you imagine the pressure? My mother often reminds me the responsibility placed upon her in raising me, and I wasn't even expected to be a savior. In the midst of this pressure, this lowly unwed teenager responds, "I am the Lord's servant, may your words be fulfilled." This is faith and reliance upon God. It is the knowledge that we are not in control but are stewards of the Creation that He has given, controls and is guiding towards a purpose.

The wonderful part is that God invites us to participate with Him in His creation and plan! He makes us stewards of creation, participants in His purposes! How will you respond? Keep in mind the words of Mordecai to Esther, "If you remain silent, *deliverance will arise from another place*. And who knows but that you have come to your position **for such a time as this.**" God's plan will be carried out, the question becomes, to what extent will you be a part of that plan? Will you, as Mary, step out on faith in the midst of unknown dangers and say, "I am the Lord's servant" may His will be done? In this season, what good things have you been put in charge of to share with those who have great need?

**Chase Arndt**

## December 22

Anticipation. I'm sure we've all experienced this emotion before. Sometimes it is met with joy, sometimes anxiety, or maybe even a little bit of both. Advent is a season of anticipation. A time where we, the church, are awaiting the arrival of our Lord Jesus Christ. As we wait for an expected event we may be filled with joy and excitement. However, sometimes the process of waiting is difficult. We become impatient. In a society where we have to wait less and less for the things we anticipate, Advent can be a stark reminder of where the desires of our hearts lay. How long are we really willing to wait? Maybe in these moments, when we become impatient or frustrated, we bring this up and prayer and ask God to give us patience. I think the season of Advent is a great reminder that more often than not God may answer our prayers by providing opportunities. If we pray for patience we may be provided with an opportunity to practice patience. This season leads to the celebration of the birth of Jesus, our hope for the world. This season reminds us that hope and patience work together. I hope today you anticipate what is to come, to be reminded of the hope Christ brings us, and to know that we are given an opportunity to practice patience. Though we may not see the ongoing work of God we can wait patiently with hope that God's plans are being accomplished even when we cannot see them.

*Romans 8: 24-25* – For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Justin Miller



## November 29

Lately when I have seen family, friends, or students after a long time apart, I have often found myself saying, "It's so good to see you *in the flesh*". Online meetings and conferencing technologies have helped us stay connected in many ways but there's really no substitute for being in the physical presence of another. Our worship together suffers when we can't participate *in the flesh*, and it's much harder for the church to serve as the body of Christ when our own bodies are distant from each other. Perhaps all this distancing can remind us of the Incarnation, that mysterious and wonderful gift of God's presence with his people:

"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel!" – Isaiah 7:14

Immanuel, *God with us!* Jesus walking amongst us, *in the flesh*. A Savior sent for us, to suffer as we do. He would have had headaches, and sore feet, and coughs. He would have gotten frustrated with his friends and family and would have been anxious and worried about them too. He would have had favorite and least favorite foods, and a particular kind of laugh and smell. Embodied like us, yet with the power to heal in His words and his touch. God did not stay at a distance to rescue us, He showed up in person, *in the flesh*. Let us rejoice in the gift of His presence:

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" – John 1:14

Laura Ong



November 30

### Peace Comes

Approaching the Christmas season, we may come heavy-laden; with sad hearts, uncertainty, and health issues. BUT, our heavenly Father is still in control if we are obedient, faithful, and diligent. Listen to the healing that is coming as He promises.

His parables are a reassurance of His steadfast love. He says, "Peace I leave with you," (John 14:27).

May we see this new year coming with clear eyes, trust, and joy in our hearts to celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Pray that we hear, see, and feel beyond today, for joy comes in the morning.

In the name of God, who created us; Jesus who dies for our sins; and the Holy Spirit that dwells within us daily. Amen.

**Karen Boone**



December 21

*My Soul Cries Out With a Joyful Shout* with text and music by Rory Cooney was written in 1990. The text is a re-wording of Mary's Song (Magnificat) but is set to very energetic Irish-sounding music emphasizing, in the refrain, what happens when the mighty are put down by the lowly: "... the world is about to turn." Growing up in a Christian home, I often forget that Jesus' birth was a world-changing event. It changed the course of the Roman Empire, it changed the course of the Jewish faith (the first Christians had been practicing Jews), and it certainly changed all of western history. Hymn #100 illuminates these changes and is not an evangelical hymn but a text that encourages us to be aware of how God has acted, is acting, and will act. The birth of Jesus truly "turned the world around" and allows the followers of Christ to be participants: "Though I am small, my God, my all, you work great things in me." The refrain of the hymn reminds us that the mercy of God is ever present and His justice will prevail.

*My soul cries out with a joyful shout that the God of my heart is great,  
And my spirit sings of the wondrous things that you bring to the ones who wait.  
You fixed your sight on your servant's plight, and my weakness you did not spurn,  
so from east to west shall my name be blest, Could the world be about to turn?*

*Though I am small, my God, my all, you work great things in me,  
And your mercy will last from the depths of the past to the end of the age to be.  
Your very name puts the proud to shame, and to those who would for you yearn,  
You will show your might, put the strong to flight, for the world about to turn.*

*From the halls of power to the fortress tower, not a stone will be left on stone.  
Let the king beware for your justice tears every tyrant from his throne.  
The hungry poor shall weep no more, for the food they can never earn;  
there are tables spread; every mouth be fed, for the world is about to turn.*

*Though the nations rage from age to age, we remember who holds us fast:  
God's mercy must deliver us from the conqueror's crushing grasp.  
This saving word that our forebears heard is the promise which holds us bound,  
till the spear and rod can be crushed by God, who is turning the world around.*

#### REFRAIN

*My heart shall sing of the day you bring. Let the fires of your justice burn.  
Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near, and the world is about to turn.*

**Pat Flannagan**

## December 20

The countercultural elements involved in the birth of our Savior are one aspect of the incarnation that fascinates us each advent season. Countercultural not simply with respect to modern Western civilization, but also in the context of first century Palestine and the Roman Empire. The Messiah was not to be born to parents who were of the elite or upper class, nor were they affluent. The Messiah was not born in decent accommodations, but in a stable. In addition, the first messengers of this glorious event were not the religious leaders or scriptural authorities of the day, but lowly shepherds.

In the Gospel of Luke (verses 2:8-15), we read that the shepherds are tending their flocks, in the fields, at night. While doing their job, they are shocked to suddenly be in the presence of an angel, with the glory of the Lord shining around them. After their fears are calmed, somewhat, the incredible news is shared that a Savior has been born to them, in Bethlehem, and he is the Christ. They are invited to see the Christ, in of all places, a stable, lying in a manger (probably a pretty comfortable setting for shepherds). Then even more to their amazement, a “great company” appears with the angel, praising God.

The shepherds are not hard to convince, unlike others who will encounter the Christ in the days, months and years to come. The shepherds pretty quickly decide that they must “go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened” (Luke 2:15). They hurry on their way and find Mary, Joseph and the baby in the manger. Then these lowly peasants go forth and become the first Earthly messengers of the good news, of the Savior’s birth (Luke 2:16-20). They go home “glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen.”

In our day and age, we are wonderfully blessed to have many trustworthy Christian leaders and scholars. Nonetheless, isn’t it also uplifting, when we are able to glean insight and wisdom from those of modest stature and humble spirits, who come into our presence. Let us pray that we will have eyes to see and ears to hear, when Good News is presented to us, no matter the messenger.

**John Graham**

## December 1

Please read John 1:1-7; 14-18

There is so much about this Advent that I’m experiencing afresh. Last year, as many of you know, I spent most of Advent in the hospital, with pneumonia from COVID-19 complications. Here are two things I remember from that time. The first was the incredible blessing of a simple “touch.” In the midst of safety protocols: hazmat suits, masks, gloves and face shields, when people’s eyes were the only thing I could see, I yearned for human contact. Two folks broke the safety protocols, one by holding my hand, another by touching my shoulder, both as they prayed for me. And now, I can’t help but to think about Mary, holding, snuggling, kissing, cooing, embracing God as her child. So much of what it means to be human is wrapped up in just this.... touch..... Whether through a fist bump, a hug, or holding someone’s hand, we communicate deeply our feelings of love by “touching.” The second memory was after 18 days, being released from the hospital, sitting in a lazy boy chair in the family room, listening to my daughters and wife laugh and talk in the kitchen, preparing dinner on Christmas. My heart soared hearing life joyfully expressed in conversation and words. I cherish this rich blessing in memory, especially as I remember that the WORD, became flesh....so that I might hear the Good News of God’s love spoken to my ears, to be captured by my heart. May you similarly hear words of incredible joy and love this season.

**Dave Welch**



## December 2

When I think of Christmas, I think of my grandmothers, Gladys Woolwine and Irene Crockett. My family went to both grandparents' houses to celebrate. At one house was Christmas lunch, and the other house was Christmas dinner. Both meals were filled with the Christmas spirit, Jesus' birth, laughter, family, plenty of food and memories.

My Gee-Gee Woolwine (Mom's mom) was petit and a spitfire. In the Woolwine dining room, on a regal, cherry chest of drawers, an antique Nativity scene commanded the room. The "stable" was hand-made of hewn branches- roof and all. The statues of Joseph, Mary, shepherds, sheep, Wise Men, cattle, camels, and, of course, the donkey were hand painted porcelain. I remember a natural glow emanated from behind Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus. I have the 100-year-old set today and still display all of the pieces, stable included, in my family's living room.

My Nannie Crockett (Dad's mom) was tough as nails. She was my inspiration for my life. Nannie guided me in all phases and taught me to cook fried apples, to plant and grow vegetables, and to play the game "Authors." In this card game the players match the authors (Wordsworth, Tennyson, etc...) to their writings. Every Christmas Nannie recited, by heart, the blessing of Jesus' birth from Luke 2. I marveled at how she remembered every line. The Crockett Christmas tree decorations were all blue, and each grandchild (six in all) had his/her own hand-made stocking. My stocking has Rudolph as an embellishment. My own family has blue, antique ornaments *and* my stocking in our home.

My Christmas message is to memorize Luke 2, "ponder it in [your] heart," but, mostly, cherish and remember times with family. Hold onto *solid* treasures. A piece of family *in hand* does wonders for the heart.

**Lori Byington**

## December 19

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. — *John 13: 34-35*

Recently, I have noticed resentment towards Christians. They are seen as arrogant, close-minded, and rigid. As someone who identifies as a Christian, I find this distressing but true.

Many Christians tend to maintain impossible standards and uphold unreasonable expectations. Some people have attempted to identify and find solutions to our faults and derogatory stereotypes, from updating outdated traditions to adapting to changing societal and technological times. But maybe we just need to turn back to scripture.

In the book of John, Christ's final commandment to His disciples was to love one another as He loved them. We, too, are His disciples and thus receive the same command. Yet, we are out in this world living lives of hatred, prejudice, and cruelty. We too easily become prideful and close-minded; we inflict our own pain onto others; we are resistant to diversity. We let the harshness of this Earthly life influence our every action when God, and His love, should be our only influence.

In this season of hopeful anticipation, we should focus on following His command. Life is difficult and unforgiving. By spreading love, we can make this life a little lighter. A little richer. A little brighter. It is our jobs as Christians—as disciples—to do just that.

So, this Advent, let us work towards making the world a better place by spreading Christ's unconditional love to all people. Let us, the followers of Jesus, be known for love.

**Claire Hankins**



## December 18

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. – *Hebrews 1:1-3*

I've always loved Christmas carols – the secular and the religious ones. They get me into the seasonal mood. I remember the specials on television, with famous folks singing, and I'd sing along. Although on the Gulf Coast of Texas, "the weather outside is frightful" usually meant that the Christmas Day high was 85, and if you wore your new sweater you'd be baking along with the snickerdoodles.

As the years passed, I came to understand the words of Christmas hymns, and their deeper meaning. One of my favorites is *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*, because it so beautifully sums up who Jesus is, and why he came to earth to save us. "God and sinners reconciled" is an encouraging and joyful reality of God's grace.

More years passed, and I came to appreciate – even search out – passages such as Hebrews 1 quoted above. They remind me that Jesus, although he gave up the richness of heaven to become a helpless infant, was at the same time "the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature." What a description of our Savior to contemplate during the weeks of Advent!

*Father, keep reminding us during our busy days to stop, appreciate, and give thanks for your Son, who shines his light on your true nature of love and salvation. Amen*

**Dottie Havlik**



## December 3

### The Joys of Repentance

Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord – *Acts 3:19*

When we are reminded that Advent is traditionally a season for repentance, we may feel a sense of dread. Perhaps, some may even wonder why the church always wants to drag us down and make us feel bad.

It is true that repentance involves some measure of regret and sorrow, as we face facts about our failures and the harm that has resulted; but two activities in Sunday School helped me to see the more joyful side of repentance.

First, as we were discussing the Parable of the Prodigal Son, I asked the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> graders to draw emojis for how they thought the characters felt at different points in the story. It is true they drew sad faces for the younger son sitting in the pigpen, thinking about how badly he had messed up. But, you should have seen the smiley faces they drew for when the son came home and was unexpectedly embraced by his father, then showered with gifts and affection. The smiles the kids drew could not be contained by the boundaries of the face, as seen on the right.



The next week, we ran a forgiveness relay race. The first time down the kids had to carry a very heavy backpack filled with rocks. This heavy burden represented the weight of our sins. When the relay runners returned from their first lap, they could ask forgiveness from the student representing the King and then run unburdened. Repentance sets us free from the sin that clings so closely and enables us, with the Spirit's ongoing help, to run the race that has been set before us (*Hebrews 12:1*).

*Merciful God, thank you for removing the burden of our sin and turning our sorrow into joy. In the name of Him who makes all things possible, our Lord Jesus Christ, we pray, Amen.*

**Elizabeth Patrick**

## December 4

### Little Advents

Christ's Advent was unexpected: born to a virgin Jewish girl in a cave at the margins of the Roman empire. Christ continues to show up—to make Himself perceptible to our eye/ear of faith—at unexpected times and places and in unlikely forms. He presents us with “little advents.”

In 2011, Mott and I were visiting her extended family in Bangkok, a city that—though beautiful in many ways and home to faithful Christians (and many ordinary Thais who do their best to live well and love one another)—is one of the world's spiritually darkest corners. I won't detail the horrors that plague that city, but suffice to say that the worst things you've likely heard about it are sadly true.

One hot afternoon we were shopping in Chinatown. As we passed an open courtyard between the two main thoroughfares, I noticed a young man, fourteen or so, exit one of the nearby apartment buildings. He walked to the center of the courtyard, stepped onto a bench, and to my surprise lifted a crucifix high in the air with his right hand. He said nothing, but stayed there, cross aloft, for more than five minutes.

I was not a believer at the time, and internally mocked him. But it made a mark on me. I remember his act of strange and unexpected faithfulness, and now pass it on to you. Ten years later, I reflect on what made him do that—what little advent sparked such light—and marvel at the Spirit's workings (Mark 4:27). Even (and especially) in dark places, Christ is there, waiting to reveal Himself.

As C. S. Lewis observed, the Spirit leads us to “steal past those watchful dragons.” It is the Spirit's work, not ours; we need only yield to His little advents.

**Chase Mitchell**

## December 17

For me, Christmas is a day where friends and family can come together, a day where people's troubles can be put behind them, and a day where we celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is a day that people are always excited about because of the magical feeling that you are important when you open your first present.

Even if Christmas didn't include presents, it would still be a magical day that people would remember for the rest of their lives.

**Moses Ong (age 11)**



## December 16

Each year, I grow more attuned to God's manifestation of merciful loving-kindness in the natural world. When the trees put on their party clothes of red and orange in the fall, I am reminded that only a God supremely attentive to our delights would design such an "extra" world: a world with bonuses and surprises around every corner, like daffodils in the spring and fireflies in the summer.

When a quiet blanket of snow descends in winter, the sparkle and shine of the muffled earth is a living sermon teaching me that I am called to wonder. This attentiveness—both mine and God's—is a relationship, and a practice. I am daily called to slow down, pay attention (as both Mary Oliver and Frederick Buechner adjure us to do), and direct my energies towards something outside of myself. I'm called to put down the cell phone, step away from the dirty dishes, and just *be*—be a small but important part of the tapestry of God's living artwork.

God ministers to us in every season, if we only have eyes to see it. The patient devotion God gives to the slender trees, the acrobatic squirrels, and the ridiculously pink sunrise are all calls to worship: rejoice, for his mercies are new every morning! (Lamentations 3:23) In this dark time when every news article seems dismal and so many are hungry or stateless or abused, it's easy to despair. But the softly falling snow is a reminder that we are daily called not to despair, but—impossibly!—to hope. Hope *especially* when it feels like all is lost.

Joy Harjo, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Poet Laureate of the United States and the first Native American Poet Laureate, writes: "Our ancestors are not only human ancestors. What do you see when you fly to the top of the ancestor tree?" ("Let There Be No Regrets"). Friends, I invite you to slow down and embrace a tree today. Commune with your ancestors, both natural and spiritual, animal and human, and feel your place in God's "family of things" (Mary Oliver, "Wild Geese"). His eye is on the sparrow (Matthew 10:29-31)—and his eye is on *you*. Both are his dear ones, and both are called to flourish and to hope.

**Erin Kingsley**

## December 5

One of my favorite things about working with children is listening to their responses to questions. On a recent Sunday morning, I read the Christmas story to the children. After a brief discussion, I asked the children to imagine being one of the characters in the story. I received some interesting responses! Several children said they would like to be an angel because they can fly, while others also wanted to be angels, but because they sing and deliver good news. Some wanted to be a sheep or even a kitty in the stable, just because they like animals. One second grader said that she would like to have been the donkey that carried Mary. A few others said they would like to have been the star because it shone brightly and led the way for the kings. One boy wanted to be a king, or wise man, because they are rich and wise! One boy even said he would like to be the hay because he would know everything going on in the stable.

Their responses caused me to think about all the different characters in the Christmas story, even the hay! All the characters were important. The shepherds were lowly and outcast, but they came in haste to worship the baby. The kings had plenty of wealth, but Mary and Joseph didn't turn them away. They, too, worshipped Jesus. God even used His creation to play a role. Even the star, directed by God, had a purpose. Even the donkey, directed by God, had a purpose. And, yes, God can use even the hay! All of creation is made to worship Him.

God is inviting us to be part of His great story of redemption. All the members of the body of Christ are important and can contribute. Sometimes we may feel like the lowly shepherds, that we don't have much to offer. At other times we may feel more like the kings, very blessed and wanting to give gifts generously!

I invite you to take some time to reflect on the characters in the Christmas story. With whom do you identify? Let us come and adore Him, Christ the Lord!

**Lilly Osborne**

## December 6

The first thing we know about St Nicholas is that he did not come from the cold climes of the North Pole, but from Mediterranean heat – the town of Myra, on the coast of modern Turkey. We know he was venerated early, but it would be centuries before his life was written, and the stories continue to accumulate.

The earliest story of Nicholas, appearing by the 500s, is that the saint rescued some Romans from wrongful execution by appearing to the Emperor Constantine in a dream. Around two centuries later, by far the best known story emerged. Nicholas felt burdened by an inheritance from his wealthy parents. On hearing of three girls who were going to be sent to a brothel by their penniless father, he dropped a bag of gold through the window, allowing the first to be married as she now had a dowry. Nicholas did the same on the next two nights, and all three girls were rescued; the scene was painted over and over in the middle ages, an example of gospel generosity, and practices of gift-giving on St Nicholas' Day (December 6) sprang up.

Still later stories associate Nicholas with the rescue and resuscitation of three boys who had been killed by a wicked butcher and placed in pickling vats. Some tales place him at the Council of Nicea in 325, at which, enraged by heretical views on the Trinity, he punched their propagator. As the middle ages progressed, Nicholas became part of the lore of particular places and trades. Churches were named for him, sailors venerated him, and images of him varied – either a bishop or a woodsman, but in all cases a giver of gifts (occasionally meting out punishments as well).

This building of memory is not a deviation from Saint Nicholas, but a legacy: he shows us generosity enacted. It's no wonder that we come to associate him with the gift of Christ.

**Martin Dotterweich**

## December 15

“My grace is sufficient for you.”— II Corinthians 12:9

“I will never leave you or forsake you.”— Joshua 1:5

“Behold, I am with you always.”— Matthew 28:20

These scriptures are so familiar to us. There are also beloved hymns that reinforce these truths: “Great Is Thy Faithfulness,” “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” “Jesus Loves Me.”

So, where do we go from here? Are the bible verses and the hymns just words in another year of pain and challenge? Are these verses and hymns so common in our religious experience that they are rote?

Is our testy response “BUT, God...?” as we remember all we have been through in the long year since last Christmas? If the answer is “yes,” we need to change our whining to affirmation and say instead, “But God... is in charge.” He knows our end from our beginning. He knows what each day holds for us. When we embrace his all-knowing care in our lives, we get to the point where we can truly say, “But, God knows what is best. He holds both the past and the future.” We can trust the words of scripture. We can draw on the hymns for strength. We cannot know what a day holds. But we do know who holds our days. Praise be to God.

Recently I attended worship at Katie Vande Brake's church in Harbert, Michigan, when I visited her. Not only did my husband die early in 2021 but also just before leaving the house I learned that two friends had died that morning. When I got to church, I was struck by God's providence. The sermon was titled “Enlarging your Soul through Grief and Loss.” Even before my husband Ron died and even before my friends died, God knew and was providing for me through that message. Even the children's sermon reinforced the theme of finding our way through grief and loss by means of a book called *Tear Soup* by Pat Schwiebert.

God's ways are not our ways. We are rarely ready to relinquish those we love to death. Nonetheless, he sent his Son in a lowly manger to bring us hope, to save us, to comfort us.

“Oh Come Let us Adore Him, Christ the Lord!!”

**Sandra Grubbs**

\* with encouragement and help telling the story from Katie Vande Brake

## December 14

Advent is a season of expectation and preparation, as we look forward to our celebration of the birth of the Christ child, God's anointed Son and our Savior, in the manger in Bethlehem. In Isaiah we have some of the earliest prophecies concerning God's plan for eternal salvation. As references I have selected two passages where a child is the central character. In Isaiah 9:6 "Unto us a child is born" and in Isaiah 11:8 "and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest" with the first passage recognizing God's plan for eternal salvation for all people in the form of a child and the second passage the harmony within all of God's creation that will be exemplary of Christ's Messianic kingdom.

As I reflect on the events of this past two years and in contrast look forward with anticipation to the beautiful Christmas season pageantry at our church, we find our greatest hope in God's gift of an innocent baby, Jesus Christ, born in the most humble of circumstances in Bethlehem. We have literally seen our world come crashing down with the advent of the COVID-19 virus and with racial turmoil that has torn our country apart. In the midst of all of the crises that we have faced the centrality of the birth of the Christ child as the most important event in history is becoming more and more profound. Where would we be today if our hope was not in our personal relationship with Jesus Christ? He is our ever present help in times of trouble. He is the well of living water that never runs dry and to whom we can always turn in every one of life's circumstances.

When we think of a child we think of innocence. Christ wants us to come to Him as an innocent child. He wants us to throw off every inhibition, fear or worry and come to Him with our whole being in submission to Him. As Christians this is the challenge that we face every day. In a recent church service we sang "I Surrender All". This is Christ's request to us every day. This is where the fruits of the Holy Spirit are manifested.

In closing Leigh and I have discovered as a result of God's abundant blessing the joys of grandparenting. Last Christmas I remember seeing two our grandchildren as shepherds in the Christmas pageant and thinking well, Christmas is really all about the children, but realizing that Jesus admonishes us to come to Him as innocent children, the celebration of the birth of the Christ child is really for all ages and all people around the world. People need the Lord to discover how His love breaks through and brings love where there is hatred, joy where there is sadness and peace where there is turmoil. He is the way, the truth and the life everlasting. Let us be the church that takes the light of Christ into our world wherever He leads us.

**Tom King**

## December 7

If, like me, you were spoiled in childhood by a parent who seems to love every children's book she's ever read and had unending time to read them to you, then you may already be familiar with the classic Australian Christmas tale, *Wombat Divine*. Per the jacket cover, *Wombat Divine* is a story about a wombat who dearly loves Christmas and has waited his whole life to try out for a role in the Nativity play. Wombat enters the audition room full of hope and anticipation about his part in the play. Yet to Wombat's growing dismay, there's something not quite right about every role he auditions for. He is too heavy to be the Archangel Gabriel, too big to be Mary, too short to be a king, too shortsighted to be a shepherd, and the list goes on. Before long, there are no more parts left to play. Wombat is heartbroken; until his friend Bilby suggests that Wombat would be wonderful in the role of the Baby Jesus. Wombat plays his role to perfection, and the Nativity play is a roaring success.

Wombat's journey to find his place in the Christmas story resonates deeply with me this Advent season. He is filled with hope and anticipation. He understands the importance and reverence of the Nativity story and is eager to welcome it. And yet despite this hope, all Wombat is able to see throughout most of the story is his own shortcomings. He is distracted by the ways in which he fails to measure up. He begins to doubt his worthiness. The story of *Wombat Divine* becomes a reminder for me that the true peace of Christmas comes not from wrestling with my own place in the story, but from recognizing that the role has already been laid out for us in the Word becoming flesh. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." - John 1:14. Christ's abiding love is the blueprint which requires no audition, and when we see His glory, all else subsides. May the knowledge of Christ's abiding love and glory, evident in his dwelling with us, fill you with peace in this season. Just like Wombat Divine.

**Kathryn Welch**

December 8



Open Auditions: The

Christmas Story

**Mary & Joseph** – young and surrounded by scandal

**Innkeeper** – focused on logistics and limitations

**Farm animals** – frontline witnesses for the whole story but dumb

**Angels** – performed the first flash mob from heaven

**Shepherds** – worked third shift then abandoned work to become a walking tell-all

**Magi from the east** – star-chart followers who still couldn't find where they're supposed to go

**King Herod** – paranoid king baby

**Christ child** – [position already filled]

I hope you'll forgive the artistic license in my "character" descriptions. I think we can all agree that we're a long way from the original in our celebrations today; we've all taken artistic license in our observation of this holy holiday. In contemplating how my own little family might connect with the Christmas story in today's culture, we've copied ideas from children's birthday parties. We bake a cake with candles and sing "Happy Birthday" to Jesus. Essentially, we've become birthday party guests.

Have you ever asked yourself what part you play in the Christmas story? Have you grappled, like I have, with doing Christmas "right"? Now I wonder, considering the original cast of characters, can we really do it "wrong"? As inept and clueless and flawed as we are, we're still no less (or more) made in the image of God as the very real people that were there when the Christmas story went live. God doesn't need us to be equipped or righteous or learned. In fact, His redemption of our failings is what points so profoundly to His glory. Amen? Amen!

So get on a donkey, follow a star, listen to voices in the night, or heed the visions in your dreams – just show up; this is not a rehearsal.

December 13

To Jesus on His Birthday

For this your mother sweated in the cold,  
For this you bled upon the bitter tree:  
A yard of tinsel ribbon bought and sold;  
A paper wreath; a day at home for me.  
The merry bells ring out, the people kneel;  
Up goes the man of God before the crowd;  
With voice of honey and with eyes of steel  
He drones your humble gospel to the proud.  
Nobody listens. Less than the wind that blows  
Are all your words to us you died to save.  
O Prince of Peace! O Sharon's dewy Rose!  
How mute you lie within your vaulted grave.  
The stone the angel rolled away with tears  
Is back upon your mouth these thousand years.

Edna St. Vincent Millay

The Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and playwright, Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892—1950), was born in Rockland, Maine and a graduate of Vassar College. She published extensively and drew large crowds to her live poetry readings. She wrote some of her best poetry near the end of her life, after being paralyzed from a road accident for years. The poem above was composed in 1928.

## December 12

### “Peace on earth...”

One Sunday afternoon in December a dozen or so years ago, I found myself on the upper roof of my house, using a pole to hang Christmas decorations on the gables of the house.

Less than thirty minutes later, I was sitting in a church listening to a program of Advent Organ Meditations. I came in my work clothes, slid into a pew, and was rewarded to an hour of blissfully beautiful music. There was no spoken liturgy, no applause; no “suggested donation”: just one quiet piece after another based on Advent hymns. The intent of such a program is to take ourselves out of our holiday busy-ness, to slow ourselves down, to enter into a more meditative state, and to reflect on the words of scripture.

I was amazed at how differently I felt by the end of the program. I left as quietly as I had come, not talking to anyone (other than God). I had been transformed.

On **Sunday, December 19, 2021 at 3:00 p.m.**, I will be offering a similar program of **Advent Organ Meditations** at **First Presbyterian Church, Bristol, TN**. This program will be less than an hour long, and will feature (mostly) quiet and familiar music. There will be no one asking for a “suggested donation” at the door. There will be no spoken liturgy, no dress code, and (please) no applause, not even at the end. I will give a welcome and a brief prayer at the beginning. The remainder of the program will be music. Attendees will hold a printed bulletin listing the titles and composers, along with words relating to each piece. This event will be open to all ages, young and old, so bring your kids. May all who come find inner peace and become transformed.

**Bob Greene**

## December 9

### God is Not Surprised

“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable His judgments and untraceable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been His counselor?” *Romans 11:33-34*

Life is full of moments I did not expect. I am often surprised. Some surprises prompt an easy smile: a day of warm sunshine in the middle of winter, or a “hello” at the grocery store from a friend I’ve not seen in years. Other surprises inspire a furrowed brow: a traffic jam when I was already running late, or a glass bowl suddenly shattered all over the kitchen floor. But God is not surprised. He was not looking the other way when any of these events unfolded.

Ten years ago, we nearly lost Tim. A ruptured aneurysm led to emergency surgery. Afterwards, the surgeon told me, “I’ve seen a lot of miracles, but I need to be straight with you: your husband probably will not survive.”

Soon after the surgeon told us his sobering prediction, I remembered the dear friend who had taught me this four-word summary of the providence and power of God. We were all so surprised and confused. Knowing that God was NOT surprised was a great comfort.

During Tim’s recovery, we relocated to Shepherd’s Center in Atlanta. For 3 months, we lived next door to other families whose loved ones had experienced great tragedies. Many had far heavier burdens to bear than we did. Why do some people experience miraculous recovery and others do not? God’s providence is often a mystery to us. There is much suffering on this side of eternity. Yet in all of our trials, God is always working out His purposes, for our good and His glory.

*Dear Father,*

*Your ways are beyond mine; you are never surprised. I want to trust you more, as I face challenges which tempt me to complain or to doubt your sovereign care. Help me to be thankful, Lord. Help me to trust you.*

**Alison Meredith**

December 10 & 11

JESUS IS GOOD  
ON EARTH AND IN  
HEAVEN BESIDE HIS  
FATHER IN HEAVEN-

Patty King

I WISH YOU  
A MERRY CHRISTMAS-

Michael Bryant

GOD BLESS US  
EACH AND EVERYONE-

Scott D. Sama

Merry Christmas & the  
peace and love of Christ  
to you all! Wynne Evans

GOOD WILL  
TOWARDS MEN-

TOWARDS MEN

JANES

I WISH YOU  
A MERRY CHRISTMAS-

CHRIST WINTERS

THANK YOU JESUS  
FOR YOUR  
EVERLASTING LOVE-

Deborah Whitaker

THANK YOU  
LORD JESUS-

Flora MacEwen

JESUS LOVES  
ME - PORTER  
HILLARY

CHRISTMAS  
LOVE AND  
PEACE -

Love  
Violet Hanson