



Advent Devotional 2022

Holding the Holy

This Advent season our theme is Holding the Holy. Certainly, we look forward to holding the newborn Christ Child in our lives. Holding the Christ child in our hearts and lives is a holy moment. On our journey to Bethlehem this year, we will also hold onto the holy stories written by people in our church community.

You are holding something holy right now---an Advent devotional which includes a reflection, a scripture and a prayer or practice for each day of the season. To be holy is to be imbued with the sacred, the awareness of God- here- with us. When we pause, every day, to connect with God's Presence, we prepare for the coming of the Christ child in our lives and in the world.

The reflections gathered here include many holy moments: treasured memories, challenging moments of loss, sustaining insights, and holy gratitude for community. As I read through these stories, I noticed how many of them are everyday moments. These ordinary moments were cherished as assurances of God-here-with-us. I began to wonder how many of these moments I miss every day, moments that I brush past because I have too many things to do, moments that do not seem important in the grand scheme of things, moments that I miss for any number of reasons.

Advent is the time when we slow down, when we stop and notice the light, the acts of kindness, and the power of generosity. To slow down in Advent is counter-intuitive because we are seduced by the busyness, the to-do lists, and the expectations of others. This devotional reminds us to slow down and take in all the ways God, Divine Love, is here. The gift of this devotional can be opened every day allowing hope, peace, love and joy to be born into our world.

Guidelines for Using this Devotional

Whether you are praying with this devotional alone or with a small group, here are some ways to approach each reading.

Take a moment to pause, be still, be present. Silently or out loud, welcome God's presence in this time. You might want to light a candle before you begin, a reminder of the Light of Christ present with you.

If it feels comfortable, you might want to prepare yourself by offering a version of this prayer: "Creator God, what most needs my attention right now?" Then read the day's entry attentive to the message God's Love is providing for you.

Going Deeper: Topics for Discussion in Small Groups

After gathering, lighting a candle:

-Take a moment to check in with each other. Sample questions:

1) How would you describe the weather system in your heart/soul (sunny, cloudy, partly cloudy, stormy);

2) What are you grateful for today?

3) Choose a headline/current event at the beginning, share your responses/concerns, and then continue with your gathering perhaps exploring one of the approaches listed below. Conclude the time together by going back to the current event/headline. Do you see it differently? Do you feel nudged/guided/called to respond in any way?

-remind the group that what is shared within the group is kept confidential

-what stood out to you in today's reading (or in this week's reading)? What did it mean to you?

-did a reading remind you of an experience or insight you've had? Take a moment to remember, and perhaps share it.

-did a reading disturb or unsettle you in some way? Pay attention to that response as well. As you sit with that response, notice how you feel it in your body, or does an image come to mind? Offer your compassionate attention to whatever arises for you. Hold any insights with curiosity, with a tender and open presence. Thank God for this time and for any insights or comfort this practice provided.

-if a reading touched you, send a note/text/email to the author with a message of appreciation

-each entry in this devotional is accompanied by a scripture as well as a prayer or practice. The intention was to highlight a major theme. Perhaps something different stood out to you. Does a different scripture or theme come to mind? Share that with your small group. Experiment with writing a different prayer or practice to go with this reflection.

-choose one reading and re-read it together. How does this reflection invite you to approach your day, or preparation for Christmas, differently?

-gather some colored pens/pencils/crayons and experiment with drawing/doodling a response to the week's readings. Even if this approach initially feels awkward, it is a practice that can surprise you with insights and comfort. Give it a try.

-choose a scripture from the week's readings and read it slowly two times, each time pausing to consider these questions. After first reading ask: what word or image stood out to me? Share your responses. After the 2nd reading (perhaps using a different translation), ask what might God be inviting you to do or say or change because of this scripture? Conclude with a moment of silence then give thanks for this time.

End your time together by sharing prayer requests and praying.

Sunday, November 27, 2022

This memory comes back to me, almost every year. My daughter Stacey was just a toddler. My stepsons, her brothers, were 9 and 12 years older than she was, so we all worked together to keep Christmas magical for Stacey. And because we shared custody of our boys with their mother, they always left us on Christmas Eve to spend the rest of their holiday with her.

That meant that Santa had to get to our house early so that he could deliver gifts to all three children before the older two went to their other home. At 3:45 every Christmas Eve afternoon, everyone would disperse—to the shower, for a nap, to gift-wrapping—so that Santa could arrive, unseen, at precisely 4:00 and gifts could be opened before our 5:00 deadline.

I love that memory now. I look back and think about how together we were making the best of a difficult family situation, each of us in our own way. I remember funny things the boys said about why they had to take a shower at precisely the right time.

But I also remember, through the gentle haze of my nostalgia, that those Christmas Eve afternoons did not always feel like we were making beautiful memories. I felt irritable and rushed. I grumbled under my breath about how hard it was to share children with another family, how unreasonable this arrangement was, and how it interfered with my vision of a perfect Christmas.

How much more lovely I could have made those moments, for myself and everyone else in my family, if I had more easily forgiven our life for not being perfect, and loved those moments as they were happening, with their own odd brand of imperfection. I look back now and know what I didn't know then: how few of those afternoons there were, and how much each of them was worth treasuring.

All during Advent we sing *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*. Come, God, to be with us. We are so conscious of all that is not yet right. Come fix the world, fix our families, and fix us. Sometimes, I think, the Jesus we celebrate on Christmas is the one who never arrives in a way that quite fills our expectations.

- Kathi McShane

Scripture: Exodus 23: 20 "See, I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared.

Prayer: Help us see the holiness in the details of today.

Monday, November 28, 2022

Heaven on Earth

For me, the time of Advent holds the promise of hope. Each year I try not to focus as much upon the outer busyness, but open to the loving-kindness filling more of our days, along with enjoying the decorative lights adorning our homes and shining forth in the darkness of winter evenings.

There is a shift in energy as hearts open, allowing God's light to shine forth more brightly. Most favorite of all is Christmas Eve's still silence and the feeling of peacefulness descending, knowing in that moment heaven on earth. As a new Church member, I am grateful to join with SRVUMC in welcoming, preparing, and joyfully celebrating Advent.

- *Ginny Fereira*

Scripture: Luke 17: 20-21 Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed, nor will they say 'look, here it is!' or 'there it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you."

Prayer: The kingdom of God, the Presence of God, is here with us, in all of creation. Help us, Holy One, to live today, aware of God right-here-with-us. Now and always.

Tuesday, November 29, 2022

It kind of chafed when our son's second-grade teacher told him that there was no such thing as Santa. When our seven-year-old brought home this challenge, we answered that adults did not necessarily know all the truths about life, even if they were teachers...and that, for our family, Santa really existed.

I later wondered, however, "Why *did* my husband and I go to such lengths around the mystery of gifts at Christmas?" Why did we encourage letters to Santa? Or promote our kids annually purging and donating favorite toys the month before Christmas? Why did we store bicycles and scooters in the winter garage of our kind neighbors, who always allowed us in at indelicate hours to retrieve them? And why did we ask construction workers building our swing set on Christmas Eve to wear red elves' hats, just in case the babysitter and children returned home early, before dark (as, it turned out, they did)?

Did we go to such lengths selfishly, just to see the joy in our children's faces at five o'clock on Christmas morning? Or might we also have been helping them to strengthen their neurobiological muscles for faith and hope? I like to hope it is the latter, and that the wonder of Santa demonstrating God's goodness persists with our and others' actions, especially around Christmas.

- *Kathy Hymes*

Scripture: Romans 15:13 May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Prayer: Dear Lord, please help me to pay close attention to the world around me and, as I see your goodness, to restore my own faith and hope. And please help me to demonstrate your goodness to others, to nourish their faith and hope as well. Amen.

Wednesday, November 30, 2022

Our Danville home was destroyed in a fire in February 2005 and our family was displaced for 20 months until November 2006.

We loved celebrating Christmas in our home that included SRVUMC's Christmas Eve 8:00 service and recognized how depressed our family would be during the upcoming holidays. Our sons were 13 and 16 at the time so we decided to make lemonade out of our lemon situation and booked a trip over the Christmas holidays to New Zealand and Australia since it was summer "down under".

We went to a Methodist church in Queenstown, New Zealand on Christmas Eve and as soon as we started singing the hymns from the Methodist Hymnal, we felt an instant connection as we celebrated the birth of Christ with fellow Christians in another continent. We had an amazing New Year's Eve in Sydney, Australia so it turned out to be one of the best trips of our lifetimes.

Although we don't always understand difficult bumps in the road, we need to trust God to help us through tough times.

- Cindy, Rob, Matthew & Ross Rudow

Scripture: the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in Daniel chapter 3, affirms that when we face fire, God will be with us: "So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out of the fire, ²⁷ and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them."

Prayer: Holy One, always-with-us, our faith does not protect us from challenges or pain. Our awareness of You does open our eyes and hearts to see You even in the midst of the fires that threaten our well-being. May we do all we can to help those harmed by fires in our communities. Show us the Way.

Thursday, December 1, 2022

First, go back in time about 60 years. Then, I'll help you imagine something you have probably never imagined: a Christmas Eve Polish wigilia at my immigrant grandparent's home on the southside of Chicago. A *wigilia* is the meal you eat, but it is no ordinary meal. It must be done a specific way and by the time I was 10 years old, I and all my 16 girl cousins knew the meaning of each step.

There was a certain seating arrangement—grandparents at the head, their children and families followed in descending age order. There was always one empty chair. You might have the opportunity to entertain angels unaware! A little bundle of straw was placed at the corners of the table—to remind us of Jesus' birth in the stable. We did not start the celebration until the first star appeared in the sky—looking for that star was a job my cousins and I relished.

There was a pre-dinner activity I have come to appreciate very much as I have grown older: before taking our seats, at each place was a decorated thin wafer called *oplatek*. You took this wafer and exchanged a piece with each person present, wishing them a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. It also carried a deeper meaning: that all slights or misunderstandings with one another during the past year were forgiven. I believe my father's family took this blessing seriously, as he and his seven brothers and sisters got along famously. The meal began with grace, of course, said by my grandmother, and then a toast by my grandfather.

I have happy memories of these gatherings. I enjoyed the structure they gave to our family life and the way they connected our cousins together. I appreciated all the work my family did to prepare the celebration.

- *Phyllis Meyer*

Scripture: Romans 12: 10-13 Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, and faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

Today's Practice: Before each meal today, let's pause to say grace. For all those that provided and prepared and enjoyed the meal, we say thanks. May we live newly aware of our connection to each other.

Friday, December 2, 2022

The Children's Pageant had the usual chaos and cheer that year. Our youngest 3-year-old shepherd was beaming, clearly delighted to finally be up front. He'd been waiting for months. Now, at last, he joined his older brother in the pageant.

One Christmas carol later, he was hopping from foot to foot. That and the position of his hands communicated an urgent need: he needed to go to the bathroom. Now. All the parents in the pews noticed. We looked at each other. We wanted to help without drawing too much attention to him. No one did anything, though.

Except for the pageant director. With calm grace, she moved quickly onto the stage and whispered to the youngest shepherd that she needed help getting the angels ready. Would he be her assistant? He agreed and exited stage left. He joined again soon afterwards escorting the angels onto the stage. All was well.

And all these years later, I remember that moment. I cherished being a part of a community that cared for the young and vulnerable among us. I remember how the pageant director acted quickly and with compassion. To see the needs around us, to do something helpful while being respectful, kind and compassionate----seems to me that is how we follow the way of Christ Jesus. That year at the pageant we celebrated the meaning of Christmas.

- *Kim Risedorph*

Scripture: John 13: 34 I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

Prayer: Help us live with great love for each other, each and every day. Open our eyes to see the needs for compassion and courage, and sent us there. Amen.

Saturday, December 3, 2022

A favorite Christmas memory for me is being with my parents, brothers, and sister, while sitting in our formal dining room. The table was decorated with the linen tablecloth and the china dinnerware we only used for special occasions. We enjoyed the wonderful meal that my mom would always prepare while reminiscing over the good times and laughing all the while. We took it for granted that we would always have days like this. In the years since we've experienced LIFE, and it will never be the same.

- *Patsy Kyles*

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 3:1 For everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven.

Prayer: Holy One, we give thanks for the memories of time with family and loved ones. The laughter and special occasions we shared fill us with a tender nostalgia. We miss those who are no longer here. We now say their names out loud, as a way of remembering. (*Name the loved ones you are missing today.*) Help us trust them, and ourselves, to your eternal care. Now and always.

Sunday, December 4, 2022

It's about a Birthday...

As my children were growing up it was always hard to keep the focus on why we, as a family, celebrated Christmas. It is the birthday of Jesus. That often got lost in hustle and bustle of preparation. Parties, presents and decorations often overshadowed our Christmas faith story. I knew I wanted to build traditions that would help us to focus on "the reason for the season." We had three ways we celebrated all season.

Each Sunday evening we would light a candle on our Advent wreath, read a Bible verse and talk about that Advent week's focus. The Candle of Hope. The Candle of Peace. The Candle of Love. The Candle of Joy. This wreath sat in the middle of our dinner table so we would talk about how the symbol of Advent showed up for us that day.

We also made it a point as we drove around town to point out all the beautiful Christmas lights. To our family those lights represented birthday candles for Jesus. We would call out "Happy Birthday Jesus!"

And on Christmas morning we went back to our Advent wreath. The center candle was always the special birthday candle for Jesus. We would have a Christmas cake and the morning celebration was truly a birthday party.

My children are all grown now. I am sharing some of these traditions with my grandchildren. I also carry them in my heart and Christmas lights are always birthday candles as I whisper "Happy Birthday Jesus!"

- *Laura Roy*

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

Prayer: May the Christ be born in us again and again. May we be Christ's Presence, together, in this world. Amen

Monday, December 5, 2022

Advent has never been an easy season for me. Even though the activities that we celebrated in the church were ones of joy and anticipation, the responsibility for making sure that they “came off without a hitch” often weighed heavily upon me. As a result, there were times in which I was simply not fully present to the moment and its meaning. All the details got in the way.

There was, however, an Advent moment that challenged my approach. During the time that I served the Asbury UMC in Livermore, our congregation gathered in the sanctuary for a Sunday evening Christmas program and there was an anticipatory buzz as we waited for the program to begin. Before it did, however, I noticed a toddler who was making his way down the aisle on uncertain legs. Even though his walk was a bit wobbly, my son, Ryan’s vision was clear. He had his eyes fixed on me and wouldn’t let anything stand in his way!

Slowly, he made his way to the front and climbed up onto the chancel where I was sitting. He proceeded to climb up into my lap and make himself comfortable. My role (whatever it was that I was supposed to do) would have to wait—and it did. In that moment, my own son was reminding me that there was nothing more important than simply not missing the holy moment of holding my child as we together anticipated the celebration made possible by yet another child—this one in a manger.

That child, of course, who would later remind us that “unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:3) Thank you, Ryan, for teaching me a lesson that I will never forget and providing a memory that I will always savor.

- *Ron Dunn*

Scripture: Matthew 19: 14 Let the little children come to me and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.

Prayer: In this holy season, help us pause and take in the moments that most need our attention. Thank you God.

Tuesday, December 6, 2022

I am writing about a tradition that is new. After 25, or so, years of spending virtually all of Christmas Eve at SRVUMC singing in the choir, a few years ago our daughter invited us to join her and her partner on Christmas Eve to see the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus concert. It was an invitation that gave us a great deal of pause and that we ultimately accepted with a greater deal of trepidation. But accept the invitation we did, and on Christmas Eve the four of us headed off to the City. Sue and I were clueless as to what we were getting into, but sometimes you must take a leap of Faith.

We arrived in the Castro well before the concert was to begin so we took in the neighborhood for a bit and reveled in the festive atmosphere and the sense of acceptance, because I am confident we stood out, and not just because of our age. Ultimately, we went into the incredibly beautiful Castro Theatre for the concert, and the house was packed.

The concert commenced with the Chorus marching into position on the stage, all 250 of them! It is hard to describe the music, as it runs through an amazing range. There are many moments of pure humor and hilarious antics, there are some moments of pure choral beauty and other moments that will make you cry. We are always touched when they ask all the "Straights" in room to stand, and everyone else gives us a huge round of applause.

We leave the auditorium exhilarated, emotional and exhausted. But we know it is the right place to be as we are with beloved family and surrounded by love in that beautiful place. After a pandemic hiatus, we will be returning this year and we cannot wait!

- *Bill Fulcher*

Scripture: Luke 2: 13-14 *The Message*...The angel was joined by a huge angelic choir singing God's Praises: Glory to God in the heavenly heights, peace to all men and women on earth who please him

Moment of Reflection: Praise God for the gift of music! For music unites us, filling our souls with beauty and awe. Today, let us sing the songs of the season, celebrating joy to the world.

Wednesday, December 7, 2022

My most memorable Christmas began like most of the rest of them did before December 25, 2010: opening stockings, a late morning Christmas brunch, and a fun-filled time with my family exchanging gifts.

Once the chaos of opening presents was over, I turned my attention to Christmas dinner. After I had put the ham in the oven, filled the twice baked potato skins, and had the table set, I decided to take a walk outside and call my parents to wish them a Merry Christmas. There was no answer on their landline. I knew that they had gone to my brother's house for Christmas dinner and figured they weren't home yet, so I went back into the house to check on the ham and potatoes.

I looked at the clock and saw that it was getting late in Michigan - nearly 9:00 o'clock - so I stepped outside again to call. I was surprised when my sister-in-law answered - I caught her off-guard as well. She fumbled over her words as she told me there had been an emergency and the paramedics were in my parents' driveway trying to revive my mom. She told me what she knew and said someone would call back soon to let me know how my mom was doing. Fifteen minutes later my brother called to tell me my mom had passed away. We were both in shock.

That night, my youngest daughter Abby asked me, "Why did Grandma have to die on Christmas?" And I looked at her and said, "Why not Christmas? What a perfect time to go and be with God."

My mom had spent her last Christmas with people she loved on a holiday she loved. She always made Christmas so special for everyone in her life To this day I do not look at Christmas as the day my mom died but a day to honor the wonderful memory of who she was and who she nurtured me to be.

- *Rebecca -Ten Elshof*

Scripture: Psalm 23 *The Voice Bible*: The Eternal is my shepherd. He cares for me always.....even in the unending shadows of death's darkness, I am not overcome with fear. Because you are with me....

Today's Practice: Let us not miss an opportunity to appreciate our loved ones---in word and actions.

Thursday, December 8, 2022

As a child growing up in the Midwest, I have so many fond memories of Advent and the Christmas season. For me this is the time of year that blends nostalgia and preparation together in one glorious package. As an adult, Christmas takes on more of a spiritual role in which I prepare for the celebration of Jesus' birth. This is all well and good, but I don't think it would be as meaningful for me without the wonderful memories of my youth. It is the power of these memories that completes the picture for me. The nostalgia that makes it all come together for one wonderful celebration.

Listening to the crunch of footfalls on fresh fallen snow. Being covered in puffy snowflakes that light up when the glow from the streetlamps caresses their symmetrical pattern. Smoke trailing from chimneys and the smell of cedar and pine trees as the aroma wafts about the neighborhood. It's the chill in the air that asks your body to keep on moving, warding off the cold of the night. It's knowing that you can be as cold as you wish, but when it is your time, you can go into your home and feel warm and welcome again.

The carols that you've heard hundreds of times before, now becoming fresh one more time. It is the questions you ask yourself as a child: what do these Carols mean? What are they telling me? Who is this Christ Child?

The Christmas play rehearsal with the promise of your family coming to hear your stellar performance, and the always sought-after gift of popcorn and candy promised afterward. You just know that you are the one and only everyone comes to see. It's the anticipation of opening those mysterious gifts that you may or may not find under the tree. When all of this is put into a blender something bigger than the idea of Advent is created, and I find that it is important to let your imagination run freely. For me, Advent is a season of love and memories which are the most powerful forces in my life.

- *Bill Dastic*

Scripture: Isaiah 40: 3, 5 A voice cries out: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, then the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all people shall see it together.

Prayer: Ever Present God, for the gift of this season, we give thanks. May the gift of love in the presence of the Christ child fill us with awe and wonder. May we live today cherishing the questions and the warmth this season inspires. Amen.

Friday, December 9, 2022

My parents were of different faiths and decided we children should have a solid knowledge of God, and a balanced view of religion. Their firstborn arrived as a new church was created across the street from their home; San Ramon Valley United Methodist Church. Although my parents never became members, our whole family worshipped here every Sunday and my mother taught Sunday school.

Each Christmas we bundled up and walked across the boulevard to attend Christmas Eve Service, where we children sang in the choir and had cookies and punch afterward. I remember the year my brother and I discovered the loft at the back of the sanctuary; our class was so excited to be up high looking down.

Our Sunday school teacher kept busy shepherding 6 year olds away from the edge, while trying to teach us the hard words in "We Three Kings." Franks and cents? Frankly sense? Frankensteins? What the wise men offered and what we sang were entirely different things, but it was the joyfulness that mattered. My best memories of Christmas include this church, my church, and I'm so blessed to work with its wonderful staff and parishioners.

- *Susan Madden*

Scripture: Philippians 4: 4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

Today's Practice: Today, let's memorize this phrase, "Rejoice in the Lord always" and carry it with us. Write it down on a stick note or on your lock screen. As we meditate on this passage throughout the day, may it prepare us to sing the Christmas carols....with joy.

Saturday, December 10, 2022

It was Thanksgiving 1981. I had made plans with friends when I received a call from one of my sisters. She said “Mom’s really sick, you need to get home. Dad booked you a ticket.”

This was before cell phones, e-mails and even credit cards. I was young and confused and I got on the next flight from SeaTac to O’Hare. I was home. Mom had had a stroke. She was always a bit of an odd, brilliant professor type, who suffered from narcolepsy, but clearly, this was something more.

It wasn’t a stroke, it was cancer – a brain tumor, and she died December 10th. My older sisters were in young marriages, with young children. I wasn’t, and was able to blow off the semester and stay at Mom’s side. We watched Luke and Laura’s wedding on General Hospital from her hospital bed. It was a gift. At the time, I didn’t associate this with Advent, but I did associate it with the miracle of life and re-birth in memories, and my Christian faith.

That Christmas, all my sisters came home to be with Dad as he mourned the loss of his beloved wife. We were lost in the kitchen, lost with the menu, lost with how to grocery shop, and how to do Christmas without Mom. We remembered her, we talked and laughed about her and we were blessed with her presence in so many ways. In the many years that have passed (40+), at Advent, Christmas, and family gatherings – none go by that I don’t ache for my mother.

- *Nancy Benvenuto*

Scripture: Isaiah 40: 1 Comfort, O comfort my people says your God.

Prayer: Father-Mother God, wrap loving arms around our pain. Hold us close so that in your embrace we know we can ask our questions, voice our doubts, cry our tears. You are the Presence that abides with us in the darkness and in the light. Thank you, God, for being God. Amen.

Sunday, December 11, 2022

When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.

Matthew 2: 16

This Scripture is also a part of the Christmas story, and a difficult one to hear. Herod's slaughtering of the innocents is a reminder that amid the joy and comfort of Christmas lurk the scary specters of tragedy and death. Then as now, this season brings death and delight, loss and love, cruelty and caresses, violence and veneration. There is a blessing in learning to balance this tension.

One of my favorite Christmas memories is spending Christmas Eve with a friend. He was grieving the recent death of his spouse. Not wanting him to be alone on Christmas Eve, my family invited him over for dinner. We shared a festive candlelit meal and caught up on each other's lives as soft Christmas music played in the background. After dinner, we carpooled to church and worshipped together. I've never forgotten the beauty of that evening.

A few months later, my friend tragically passed away. Like the deaths of Bethlehem's slaughtered innocents, his end was swift, unexpected, and cruel. These two events are a reminder that God is present in all the brokenness of life. Shadows are defined by Light and vice versa. One cannot exist without the other, so it is only natural for brokenness to exist. Yet throughout it all, the darkness shall not overcome the Light. God is here with us--in Darkness and in Light. Amen.

- *Anonymous*

Scripture: John 1:5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Today's Practice: Light a candle in a darkened room. As you watch the flame dance in the darkness, contemplate what it means to let the light coexist with shadows. Allow the candle to burn itself out.

Monday, December 12, 2022

I quickened my pace across Sproul Plaza as the cold drizzle increased. Classes over for now, I was anxious to leave campus for the Christmas break. And to my girlfriend – I yearned for the break. I steered my gaze towards Telegraph, and there was *Hiram*! There he stood in the rain giving his usual soapbox sermon. He ranted his favorite bible passages but today no students paused to listen or to jeer and harangue him – they just veered around him on their way to Christmas.

During school session it was common to see Hiram – the ‘nutty preacher’ – trying to engage passing students. Shabbily dressed, short unkempt hair, he looked like he’d been sleeping on the lawn in front of Wheeler Auditorium. But he was articulate and keenly in command of his faculties. Often, he spout things from Revelations or quote from various of the gospels. I was probably the only one who’d speak a respectful remark or question. “Does it really mean that? Couldn’t it mean...?” I was no Bible scholar and was no debate match for Hiram, but at least I could connect if only for an instant. I hated to admit it, but I had a sort of ‘respect’ for him. I admired his... what? His dedication? Devotion? His tenacity, for sure.

But in my rush, on this rainy Berkeley afternoon, I didn’t want to engage, or even ask Hiram about this ‘Word’ that he was saying came first, and I walked on past. Then... he stopped talking and I turned to face him as he just looked at me. Awkwardly, I finally came out with, “Hiram, I wish you a wonderful Christmas!” A silly comment for sure... how would *he* have a wonderful Christmas? Then he reached out his hand. I took it. His grip was firm, and rough and calloused, and wet with rain, and warm. “Peace of Jesus be with you.” And we parted.

Oh, my Christmas was good. As we finished up Christmas dinner I felt the warmth of my girlfriend’s hand in my left hand. And, in my right hand, I could still feel Hiram’s handclasp. It continues with me.

- Brad Stribling

Scripture: Philippians 4: 7 May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Prayer: As we go about our day, may we silently or out loud, offer all we meet the blessing: Peace of Christ be with you.

Tuesday, December 13, 2022

Over the past twenty-five years, our family (grandparents, parents, children, brothers and sisters, grandchildren) has often gathered at our daughter's house in Pleasant Hill on Christmas Eve for good cheer and a bountiful Christmas dinner, followed by the opening of presents.

On Christmas morning we all gather at our home for an Old Kentucky Home breakfast (smoked bacon, country sausage, country ham, eggs, potatoes, biscuits, and more), followed by the opening of stockings filled and left by Saint Nick. At other times we've rented houses at different places where we celebrated family Christmas. Sadly, some are no longer with us, but we have wonderful memories of our joyous and loving Christmases together. We are grateful.

- Terry Sherman

Scripture: Matthew 18:20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.

Prayer: Loving God, although I do not see you and hear your literal voice, I still believe I am intimately connected with you in my heart. I miss loved ones and friends, especially this time of year when so many families seem to come together. I ask that you help me treasure my family and friends, treasuring experiences and memories, and help me to be grateful for how our lives have intersected through the years. Teach me the lesson of holding others in my heart during this holiday season. Amen. (*Written by R. Scott Colglazier A Winter Name for God*)

Wednesday, December 14, 2022

I am very blessed to have experienced Christmas traditions in two very different cultures. For the past forty-two years, I have been celebrating Christmas in the U.S., my home since 1979. I was twenty-one years old when I migrated to the U.S. However, my childhood memories of Christmas in the Philippines are still so vivid and fresh in my mind – it's as if I never left!

I am doubly-blessed that the family I married into is very traditional so a lot of the Philippine Christmas traditions that I grew up in were continued here in the U.S. through family celebrations.

Filipino Catholics, like me, begin our Christmas celebration from the “ber” months – September through December, and extends to the third Sunday of January the following year – on the feast of the Infant Jesus. The Christmas celebration was extended to January to honor the Infant Jesus to remind us the true meaning of Christmas – celebrating the birth of Jesus.

I am most touched when folks (Christians and non-Christians alike) are genuinely happy at Christmas-time. I look for happy faces, happy gestures, and just people being kind to each other. And gift-giving does it for me, too.

- *Sol Cuenco*

Scripture: Psalm 1: 2-3 Blessed is the one...whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither, and whatever they do prospers.

Prayer: Holy One, remind us once again that Christmas is not just a day or a season. Christmas is a way of living, aware of Christ's Presence here with us. Help us practice Presence today. When we forget, gently remind us. Thank you, God. Amen.

Thursday, December 15, 2022

Mary, did you know...?

I was asked to direct the children's Christmas pageant. It was an experience of miracle and delight. Dancing angels, singing shepherds, and of course Mary and Joseph and the three kings—all children in our congregation, all between the ages of 2 and 13. Our son was the littlest shepherd at age 2, toddling along in a cut-up sheet with a rope headband, adding that extra dimension of wonder and gratitude to my experience.

I was 5-months pregnant with our daughter. It was 1982, and we feared nuclear war was a real possibility and global warming was just entering public consciousness. Protests for disarmament were everywhere. I pondered in my heart, "What in the world are we doing, bringing a child into this violent, ecologically dying world?"

I found myself identifying with Mary, who was also pregnant--through that first Advent. She, too, was bearing a child into a ravaged, unsafe world. But Advent is about hope. Mary's hope, and ours. "My soul magnifies the Lord," she sang to Elizabeth. "...His mercy flows in wave after wave on those who are in awe before him." Encouraged by her "community of faith" in Elizabeth, Mary could sing with hope in the power of God's love to overcome suffering and injustice.

I touched hope again that night. The children, the baby in my womb, our church community, our faithful God always calling us forward out of the dark.

- *Lucinda Huffaker*

Scripture: Luke 1: 46-50 From Mary's Song of Praise

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowly state 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...."

Prayer: What would it mean for me today, if my prayer was: Let my soul magnify the Lord?

Friday, December 16, 2022

On Christmas Eve, the air was crisp, dry and warm. I lamented that the cinder rocks in my front yard embodied the brown and barren landscape of Las Vegas. What a contrast to the evergreen pines of my native southeast Arkansas. I, a transplanted single teacher coming from a large, beautiful family, also felt trapped within the impending doom of Christmas Day loneliness.

I decided to make a last-ditch effort to boost my own morale, I promptly drove my Datsun 210 to the nearby Mt. Charleston ski area.

There, I immediately began to slide completely out of control. (Yes, on a bunny slope.) No, I couldn't stop before I knocked the skis right out from under another, ailing bunny slope skier. Thankfully, he appeared unhurt and merciful and good-humored. Despite such an awkward "introduction, "Tim, my bunny slope target, began to slog along with me. "So, do you have an exciting Christmas Day planned?" I asked him. "No, I'm a flight attendant. Since I'm so low on the seniority totem pole, I have to work layover for Christmas Day. How about you?" "Ohh... Well, I'm only cooking crockpot chili," was my self-effacing reply. "I'll be there at 10:00 a.m. if you invite me," he said. "Of course," I responded, surprising even myself.

That Christmas day is forever memorable because through it, I began to recognize a truth that I had long ago before been told: Christmas is the spirit of sharing, even with just one other person. This day may have been the fulcrum which pivoted me toward my current tradition: joining with a friend to present a concert to raise funds for a local charity. That charity provides a small gift and a Christmas dinner gathering for people in need to enjoy. It has not, however, led me to be a better skier. Some things never change.

- *Melinda Morse*

Scripture: Matthew 18: 20 For where two or three are gathering in my name, I am there among them.

Prayer: In the midst of the lights and decorations, we are so often lonely and afraid. God of all that is and all that will ever be, be with us now. Send angels to comfort us. Send us to comfort others. Show us the way. Amen.

Saturday, December 17, 2022

Jaru's Czech Hazelnut Crescents

Traditionally, my mother-in-law makes dozens and dozens of cookies in multiple varieties. For her, making cookies is a gesture of love for the people who will eventually enjoy them. I first encountered them during John's first year in Pittsburgh for school, a couple thousand miles away from her. The familiar flavors, including these crescent cookies, offered the comforting notion that home was still waiting for him whenever he made his way back to it.

Why put her cookie recipe in a devotional? Baking together is an exercise in love. How often have you had a conversation lately that wasn't goal-directed or a bland exchange of information? When we are in the kitchen together, talk drifts from to-do lists and into family stories pretty quickly. Plus, baking makes a great multigenerational project because people with messy hands don't pick up cell phones. Don't worry: if my daughter's head didn't explode from helping with Christmas cookies, then no one's will.

The recipe below has simple ingredients and only a few steps. Use your kitchen scale set to grams, not just an online converter. Not especially sweet, these cookies pair well with a cup of coffee, even out of season.

- *Lisa Jancarik*

Jaru's Czech Hazelnut Crescents

210g flour (this works out to about 23.7 tablespoons)

160g butter (about 11.3 tablespoons)

50g granulated white sugar (4 tablespoons)

100g of hazelnuts (finely ground *not just chopped*)

Enough powdered sugar to coat the baked cookies.

Mix the ingredients and shape into about two-inch crescents. Bake at 280°F for about 20 minutes. Dip the cookies into powdered sugar while they are still warm. Yields about two cookie sheets.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 9:15 Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Prayer: Today we practice gratitude, for each gift of love, for each meal, for each person we encounter today. Thank you, God!

Sunday, December 18, 2022

Today's entry is an excerpt from *Shetland Mist*, by Heather Leslie Hammer:

Springtime 1863

Ann got up with the sun and walked out to the pasture before the others woke. The ewes had been acting strangely the day before, not eating but restlessly pawing at the ground. This morning, some were bleating. As she approached, the heavy ones retreated, and Ann suspected they were ready; in fact, lambing could start at any moment. She must bring them into the byre. She whistled to Max. "Bring them in, Max!" She stretched her arm out toward the sheep in the field.

Herding instinct kicked in, and the sheepdog trotted around the grass, urging the sheep into a smaller circle. They moved as if in a daze. Did they know they were ewes about to give birth, or did they think they were sheep headed to their slaughter? Ann hurried into the cottage to wake Annie and Robert. She would need their help to see that when the lambs dropped, they were cleaned and put to their mothers' teats. Maggie and Christina could take their turns later, after they had their breakfast.

Scripture: Luke 2: 10-12 The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Today's Practice: In Advent we listen to the angel messages, we watch for signs and messages in every plant, animal, and person around us. With eyes of faith, we'll see the hope. Help us live with hope today.

Monday, December 19, 2022

The Big Boys Men's Group has a Christmas tradition that has been carried on for many years. We look to our garages or other remote and out of the way storage areas and secure that special item we have saved for years, thinking someday it may prove useful or valuable. It might be an old rusty tool or an out of date electronic device that technology has forgotten. We then wrap it up, kind of like putting lipstick on a pig and bring it to the December Big Boys Christmas Gift Exchange. Nothing is labeled and we follow those traditional rules where you choose a gift or steal a gift from something you see, impossible to live without.

The spirit of the event is of course to enjoy the comradery of the men in our group. It is also to take a jab at the folly of excessive Christmas giving and the need to exchange expensive gifts. Christmas is about honoring the birth and life of Jesus Christ and being grateful for the gifts he has given us. It is also about caring and sharing with others and enjoying the friendship and trust of a long time relationship. This is what the Big Boys Men's Group is all about. Merry Christmas.

- *William S. Van Bezey*

Scripture: Matthew 6: 19-21 Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Prayer: Help us to hold our possession lightly. Help us find the freedom that comes from knowing this: we are more than our stuff, more than our accomplishments. Help us grow rich in patience and kindness each and everyday. Amen.

Tuesday, December 20, 2022

Several years ago I was reminded that there are some parts of us that never get as old, experienced and/or cynical as we think. Maybe those reminders are more intense or simply more likely at Christmas time.

It was shortly before Christmas, 10-plus years ago. The tree was up and decorated, standing in front of the living room picture window. Gifts were wrapped and piled under the tree. I'm pretty sure that Christmas music was playing.

I paused next to the tree and peered out. Maybe I was expecting rain or just checking on the status of our rather rural neighborhood. Suddenly, I froze: I saw 4 or 5 animals clopping along the street. I say "animals" because my brain suddenly went into "child" mode. My heart started pounding and took control while my brain scrambled: REINDEER!! REINDEER!! Right here on my street!!

I finally blinked several times and calmed down. "It's just a family of deer," I conceded to myself. After several minutes the image faded. But, just for those few minutes, some part of me was convinced that those animals were reindeer. The child in me was so insistent and convincing in those few moments that the memory of the wonder and the wishing have come back to me almost every Christmas since then. I saw something that I wanted to believe in and for a few minutes, it was very, very real.

The magic of Christmas can be powerful. For me, it opens the door to yearning for and believing in, miracles of all kinds. What a blessing!

- *Debra Carter*

Scripture: Luke 5: 26 Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, "We have seen remarkable things today."

Prayer: Give us eyes to see and hearts to believe the remarkable things about today. Amen.

Wednesday, December 21, 2022

The Longest Night of the Year

For 22 years our family had all gathered in the Cayman Islands where my parents lived in retirement. On the veranda, we would light the last candle in our advent wreath, sing a few carols, and the girls would open their new Christmas pajamas. The next morning there was an array of gifts, and a quick breakfast and we were off to church at the Presbyterian Church in Georgetown where Mother and Daddy were married. It would be mid-afternoon when we all gathered around the table for our feast, almost always with some of the relatives joining us. Stuffed to capacity, I was later sent off to deliver dinners to anyone Mother knew who was alone and not able to come over.

Then in 2000, our beloved traditions ended. I was still recovering from a series of back surgeries. Besides the fact that I was still trying to get off of all the pain meds that had been prescribed for me, I was also in deep grief, having lost my mother to a stroke at the end of October. Not being able to fly to the island for my mother's services made the loss even more painful.

In Danville on December 24, 2000, no one had gotten to the Christmas Eve services at SRVUMC, or driven around to look at the decorated homes in the community. The girls were home from school, Susan from New York and Jean from Denver, so they helped their dad distribute the few gifts that we had managed to wrap for each other.

After opening our presents, we cleaned up the paper and bows and moved into the kitchen to prepare our dinner. Truly I don't even remember what we managed to cook. Later that evening one of the girls looked up and said, "Well, I don't know what that was, but it certainly wasn't Christmas."

With tears in my eyes, I reached out and said, "Come here." The four of us clutched each other in a family hug. Next year would be better.

- *Marilyn Milam*

Scripture: Psalm 17: 6 (*The Voice Bible*) I am crying aloud to You, O True God, for I long to know your answer. Hear me, O God, hear my plea. Hear my prayer for help.

Prayer: O Gentle Presence, hear the cries of our hearts. Comfort us.

Tonight, on December 21, we'll have a worship service at 7 pm in the sanctuary, marking the Longest Night of the year. All are welcome.

Thursday, December 22, 2022

In 1982, I was ten, and my hometown asked me to participate in the annual light-up ceremony for the town's nativity scene. My job was to write and read a poem about the Christmas story. I no longer have the poem, nor even remember it, but the setting that evening defined my sense of Christmas.

The town first erected the nativity scene in "The Diamond" (a town square anywhere else) in 1957, but I only knew it was plainly older than me. The three-foot statues had been well-maintained by local volunteers, but cheap lattice disguised the trailer on which the nativity scene sat, and the starry night's paint job never looked dark enough to me. Christmas lights stood in for stars. Hay surrounded the scene, however, because the local state legislator brought a few of his sheep to really complete the stable experience for us. They bleated the entire fifteen or so minutes of our ceremony, so we kids were continually reminded to speak up.

Under the bright spotlights, the world seemed to center on that display, reach through and over the sixty or so onlookers' faces, and end at the closed shops across the street. It was only years later I realized that local vendors had the good taste not to call attention to themselves during our little annual ceremony.

I suppose I could tell you that I'd had some sort of transformative moment while staring at our cement baby Jesus that night. The truth is, I was too short to see him up there on the trailer. Instead, I think of Christmas, I think of a few wet snowflakes glimmering in the spotlights and my new friend from public school waiting next to me for his turn to perform.

That Advent, I'd had my first awareness of my place in a community, a participant with her own talent and ability, not just an appendage of my family or school. Plenty of good works were done in the name of Christmas 1982 in my hometown, and I got to help, even if it was with a poem I've since forgotten.

- Lisa Jancarik

Scripture: Luke 2: 16-18 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

Prayer: Holy One Our God, show us each our place in the world. Send us forth into this day, to be your love alive in this world. Amen

Friday, December 23, 2022

One of my treasured Christmas traditions began when John and I were newlyweds. After Christmas Eve mass, we would host family and friends at our home. As our immediate family grew, the number of guests grew as well.

Two of my sisters were always present at these gatherings. My sisters would stay the night in our family room and fall asleep among the twinkling lights of our tree well before John and me. We cleaned up from the festivities and prepared for Christmas morning until much later into the night.

With the rising sun, the children would creep downstairs. My sisters always witnessed the authentic joy on the faces of their nieces and nephews as they absorbed the beauty of Christmas morning. Reflecting on these past Christmases, I treasure these memories. I recognize what a true blessing this was and what a beautiful gift from God to my sisters. You see, my sisters had no children of their own.

Life has changed considerably in recent years; my oldest sister has passed away, we have moved far away from our extended families, and the children have matured. Although, we no longer have the same Christmas Eve traditions in California, we have established new traditions and God's grace continues to flow among our growing family and new friends. We are blessed.

- *Michelle Cooke*

Scripture: Matthew 18: 20 Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there in the midst of them.

Prayer: O God whose name and presence is Love, thank you for the ways family and friends grace our lives. Families come in all shapes and sizes. Help us create connections to people that support, love and cherish one another. Surprise us with a renewed awareness of how we are connected to all of creation, now and always.

Saturday, December 24, 2022

My family began a tradition of attending an 11 PM Christmas Eve service at our United Methodist church in Wayne, PA when I was 14 and my sister was 8. My favorite part of the service was always singing "Silent Night" by candlelight. It moved me then!!

Many years later, that tradition was rekindled for me as a member of the Chancel Choir at SRVUMC. It is always an incredibly moving experience, especially when we sing the final verse without any accompaniment. Just all of our voices in unison in the candlelit dark, singing about the birth of the baby Jesus. There have been years when I have been moved to tears while singing as thoughts of family and memories of past Christmas Eves come flooding back.

- *Brenda Domergue*

Scripture: Matthew 5: 14, 16: You are the light of the world....let your light so shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Prayer: On this silent and holy night, may the light find us. May we be the light of Christ's Presence, for that is the gift our world most needs. For God is the Light in us, around us, and with us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Sunday, December 25, 2022

Ten years ago, I had a first of traveling for Christmas. In 2012, I had just finished my first semester at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC and I would be flying back to CA on Christmas Day.

When it comes to travel and holidays, I tend to be like Chevy Chase's character, Clark Griswold from the 1989 Christmas movie classic, *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*. Clark oftentimes puts very high standards on trips, holiday celebrations, and other celebrations in life, which often end up being unrealistic leading to a meltdown when things don't go how Clark expects them to go.

Being like Clark Griswold with my lofty expectations, I expected that my flight would go smoothly, and I would be at my aunt's house in time for our family Christmas gathering. Unfortunately, the weather had other things in mind, as there were storms all throughout, making for a VERY rough flight and missing my connection.

While I had a range of feelings and sadness of having to miss Christmas Day with my family, it could have been much worse. I was grateful. I was grateful that the captain did everything to keep everyone safe and to be alive, grateful that the day turned out to be beautiful outside, and grateful that I was able to have a nice lunch and coffee since the Houston airport has a lot to offer. Christmas stuck at the airport reminded me not to have such high expectations, as Christmas has become simpler over the years.

Ultimately, I was able to get a flight to Sacramento booked for that evening and able to spend the few remaining hours of Christmas with my family. That Christmas taught me the importance of what really matters, that the work of Christmas and the peace and goodwill of Christmas can last the entire year, not just one day. It's a reminder not to take anything for granted.

- *Andrew Davis*

Scripture: Matthew 14:27 Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

Practice: No matter the circumstance, the Christ Presence says to us again and again: take heart, I'm with you. Where in your life do you most need to hear that truth today? That's the gift, and power, of Christmas. Christ is with you, with all. Thanks be to God.

