



2020 Advent Devotional

lovingly shared with and by the members of

First Presbyterian Church

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Comfort and Joy. Timeless.

Meaningful memories can seem just like yesterday. Fond reminiscences can be triggered by a memorable Christmas carol, a treasured hand-made ornament, the smell wafting from the oven, or the sight of Christmas lights in a window – both elegant and tacky! Suddenly, you are transported through time to a snapshot image in your head. Not only do your senses come alive, but deep feelings from that moment rush through you as if it is happening all over again. What a gift that we have years of memories and moments stored up inside covering us in comfort and joy, and reminding us of what this season really means.

What does it really mean? Are your memories about gifts or food or decorations? Or do those things ultimately remind you of loved ones and time spent with family and friends?

Christmas is about people and relationships! It's about getting together and celebrating Christ year after year with those people we love. We may long for Christmases past, or we may strive to make each Christmas better than the last. We are seeking, yearning, . . .

We are seeking His comfort and His joy – His lasting love.

As our church family shares thoughts and artwork, you will see Jesus. Sometimes He's bold, and open, and obvious. Sometimes He's subtle, and soft, and mysterious. But He is always there, offering lasting comfort and joy.

This Advent, seek Him, expect Him, prepare to be confronted and delighted by Him!

God rest ye merry gentlemen
Let nothing you dismay
Remember Christ our Savior
Was born on Christmas Day
To save us all from Satan's pow'r
When we were gone astray
Oh tidings of comfort and joy
Comfort and joy
Oh tidings of comfort and joy.



Arranged by Adam Fennell (age 9)

Booklet lovingly compiled by Elise Collins and Lea Jones.

November 29th

One of my biggest joys during Advent is decorating for Christmas. It really gets me in a festive frame of mind. Over the years, we have acquired several nativity sets. We have the one by Little People for our children. I love the donkey's yarn mane! My favorites are the ones where Jesus is not in the manger, but in Mary's arms. Her arms are tenderly wrapped around her brand new baby boy, offering Him warmth and comfort, and no doubt filling her with amazement and joy.

Nativity scenes fascinate me. I love to see how people interpret that night. Did you know that my nativity set from Brazil doesn't have sheep or a donkey? Instead, they feature a baby jaguar and a colorful parrot peering into the manger to see the tiny baby. The one from Mexico not only has a shepherd, but also a shepherdess. And, of course, the scene I have from Australia features a kangaroo! What a beautiful reminder that Jesus' birth matters all over the world!

Do you have a nativity set with special meaning? Perhaps, one your child made out of terracotta pots during Legos and LOGOS? Is there one that was passed down to you that has sentimental value? Did you acquire one on your travels? I hope you will share these with the church for our creche walk 12/20 (let Elise know by 12/15)!

One of the nativity scenes that means the most to me is not one I purchased. It was drawn by my Emma when she was 6 years old. I love that she added a palm tree and a crescent moon. I love the angel in the air, and the sheep below. I love that Mary's arms are reaching into the manger to touch her baby. I love seeing the nativity through Emma's eyes – a child's eyes full of wonder and innocence and creativity.

How will you look at Advent this year? Look, really look, at what God is trying to show you this beautiful Christmas season.

Prayer: Lord God, fill us with wonder and expectation all season long. Show up in big and small ways, and delight us! In Jesus' name, Amen.



- Elise Collins

Emma Collins (age 6)

November 30th

A Christmas Memory

When I was ten years old my grandparents, aunt, and uncle came to spend the night with my family on Christmas Eve in the old country house where we lived on a farm in Anderson County. My father had baled hay back in the fall to buy a piano for me, and I was just learning to play. Soon after our company arrived, Granddaddy said, "Play a piece, Nancy." Everyone gathered around the piano, and I played a simple rendition of "Silent Night." I still remember the warmth I felt from being surrounded by my loving family as I played the iconic carol commemorating the birth of our Saviour Jesus Christ. Afterwards we enjoyed a hotdog supper and gathered in the living room to exchange gifts. Uncle Don and Aunt Dot (Donald Hugh and Dorothy Lou, the twins) gave me a Donald Duck bank and my brother received a chess set from them. Grandmama and Granddaddy gave us each a box of chocolate-covered cherries. Though other gifts were given and received, those are the ones I remember. On Christmas Day we gathered in the dining room for a delicious, traditional Christmas dinner prepared by my mother. Later in the afternoon, our beloved extended family departed for their two-hour journey home. I will always remember that Christmas in 1963, a time that seemed so much simpler than now, but in reality had its own issues and problems. There have been many changes since the 1960's, some for better and some for worse. However, no matter what is changing and taking place in our world, we can rejoice and rest assured that we have the same loving, forgiving, wise, and holy heavenly Father who remains always and forever un-changed . . . the One who sent His only Son to save us, to show us how to live and love others, and to offer eternal life to all!"

- Nancy Wilson

Prayer: Lord God, help us to cherish moments as they happen and relish in the love You share with us through others. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Margaret Fleming (age 7)



December 1st

One of my favorite Christmas memories involves Barbie. Yes, Barbie. The Dream House! Even better than the memory of me waking up as a kid on an 80's Christmas morning to my own plastic wonderland was finally purchasing one for my girls. I remember it vividly, waiting for my over-excited children to finally fall asleep, and then dragging the enormous box into the house at midnight with my husband. It came with 1000 pieces, directions that read like Chinese, and we stared at it like "how are we supposed to create this gigantic masterpiece before sunrise!" We pulled an all-nighter that Christmas Eve, laughing, some cursing (ha), and a bottle of wine for support - finally toasting at 5am to what we had beautifully created for our children. The dream house. Magnificent, perfect, standing strong.

Fast forward 8 years later to me cleaning out the playroom and old toys. As I look at the pitiful falling walls, worn peeled stickers, and an elevator that hangs by a lone string, I wonder what the heck happened to that once beautiful dream house. What was once magnificent and strong now looks broken and sad. Not even good enough to give away anymore. The only place it deserves to be is in the dumpster. With all the smiles it brought, I never thought it would bring so many tears.

But then I started to think. That house was loved. It was played in everyday and created years of laughter and fun and joy! What appears broken and destroyed is actually not. The walls, while falling, are still holding up. The peeling stickers still show the memories of what was once there. That elevator is hanging on. It's broken, but its memories and bones are not destroyed. It's beautifully broken.

Maybe you are in a broken home, have lost someone you love, or are just struggling to hold up the walls in general. Maybe your life looks like that dilapidated Barbie Dream House and keeping it together (especially at Christmas) seems daunting and impossible. It really doesn't matter what has broken you in the past. God said in Psalm 51:8, "Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice!" I hope you remember God is greater than all the things against you. Psalm 147: 2-6 reminded me of this: "He heals the broken hearted and bandages their wounds. He counts the stars and assigns each a name. Our Lord is great with limitless strength; we'll never comprehend what he knows and does. God puts the fallen on their feet again." Yes. He knows what He's doing. God keeps the weak and broken standing. He holds us up.

Ok, yeah, the Dream House is unsalvageable. But the love and joy and memories it brought three little children and their parents can never be broken or forgotten. From the outside it appears damaged, but in reality it's still full of hope and heart and a sea of remembrances. It's far from perfect, but it's real. God's love is both perfect and real. Let go of the idea of perfection and hold on to that. Because like that Dream House, we're all a little bit broken.

“The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those crushed in spirit.”
- Psalm 34:18

- Kristen McClendon

Prayer: Lord God, You are good! Even in our most broken places, we are not alone. You offer hope, joy, and peace. Thank you! In Jesus’ name, Amen.



Annabelle McClendon (age 11)

December 2nd

All of the Christmas Carols are so special to me. As a child growing up, our family had get-togethers every holiday, but at Christmas we gathered at my Mom and Dad's home. Because I had taken piano lessons, I was the one who had to play with all of the families gathered around. I know that we sang so loud that the neighbors could hear us. I sure do miss those voices singing behind me. After I got married and moved away from Western Pennsylvania, I missed those Christmas gatherings so we continued the tradition in Michigan with our church families. Those were very special times and a lot of love was shared. With the quarantine, these gatherings are not possible, but in my heart I remember these great times with family as I was growing up.

Now any of the Christmas Carols really bring my family close to my heart.

- Kay Post

No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in union with us, and his love is made perfect in us.

- 1 John 4:12

Prayer: Lord God, thank you for people who show us your love. May we relish every opportunity to feel and to share Your love. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Beau Pinson (age 8)

December 3rd

An Advent hymn that is one of my favorites is: “While We Are Waiting, Come” by Clair Cloninger, text and Don Cason, music (1986)

1. “While we are waiting, come; while we are waiting, come. Jesus, our Lord Emmanuel, while we are waiting, come.
2. With power and glory, come; with power and glory, come. Jesus, our Lord Emmanuel, while we are waiting, come.
3. Come, Savior, quickly come; come Savior, quickly come. Jesus, our Lord Emmanuel, while we are waiting, come.”

Most of the time we may view waiting as a negative activity. However, during Advent we enjoy positivity while watching for the arrival of the birth of Jesus Christ. We enjoy the Advent wreath with emphasis on hope, peace, joy, and love. Today, we need all of these wonderful blessings.

During this Advent season,

hope gives us a way to endure while we are waiting;

peace gives us a feeling of security;

joy gives us reasons to live a Christian life and share with others;

and **love** enfolds us and helps us to make the best of our life.

“But above all these things put on **love**, which is the bond of perfection.”

- Colossians 3:14

- Sandra Cobb

Prayer: Lord God, we are always waiting for something. Help us to wait patiently, but expectantly knowing You are so good. In Jesus’ name, Amen.



Hudson Lloyd (age 7)

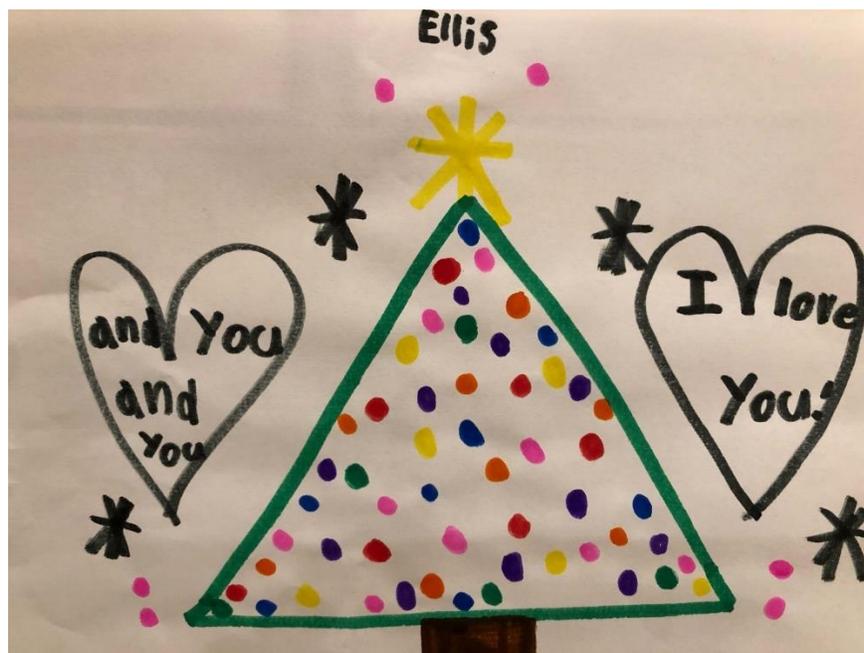
December 4th

Two of my favorite things to see at Christmas are my dogs. Especially when we have to keep them from destroying all of the decorations we put up. I still remember when I noticed that part of a nativity was missing and I turned around to see baby Jesus being chewed by our boxer, Samson.

That same Christmas, I also enjoyed seeing him and Brody get excited when we gave them new toys. They grabbed the toys and chased each other in circles around the house. Even though they don't know why they got presents or what Christmas is, it's like they still get in the "Christmas Spirit".

- Emma Collins

Prayer: Lord God, in a season when we easily get distracted, help us to experience Your pure and simple joy! In Jesus' name, Amen.



Ellis Maughon (age 6)

December 5th

The Christmas I was five years old, I wanted Santa Claus to bring me a real baby of my very own. My mother was expecting a Christmas baby, and I wanted my own baby, too! Well, the baby doll Santa brought me looked as much like a real baby as a baby doll could look!

In the following years, my baby doll was given the role of Baby Jesus in our church's Christmas pageants. One Christmas, when my family was bundled in our car, ready to leave for church, I suddenly remembered, "I've forgotten Baby Jesus!", and I went running back inside for my baby doll.

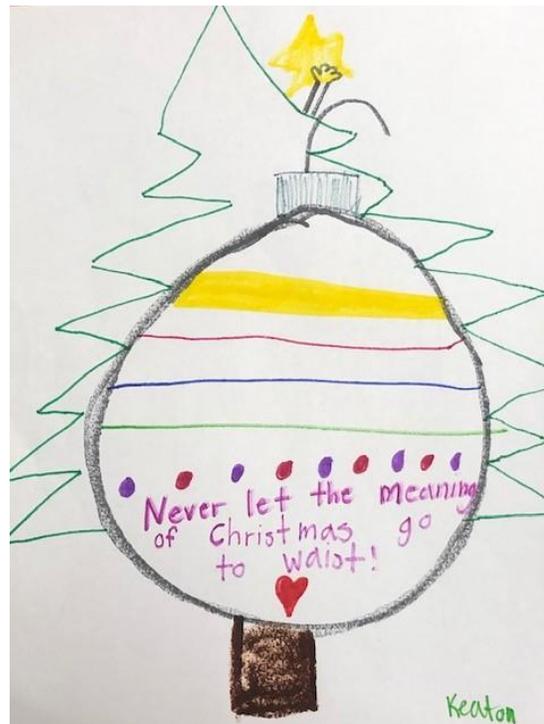
In writing this remembrance, I am reminding myself, in all of the Christmas preparations, however meaningful, NEVER to forget Baby Jesus. And, through all of the time that follows, NEVER to forget Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

- Scottie Jeffreys

Prayer: Lord God, in the hustle and bustle amidst the social distancing of this particular season, don't ever let us forget Jesus at the heart of all we do and say! In Jesus' name, Amen.



Charlie Eichelberger (age 5)



Keaton Willard (age 9)

December 6th

Christmas is one of my favorite times of year. The twinkling lights, cinnamon scented candles, and songs of peace reminding me of all that God has done for me, are a few of my favorite things. The illumination from candles and strands of Christmas lights remind me that God sent His Son to dispel the darkness in our lives. Darkness can be in the form of loss, shame, doubt, rejection, loneliness, emptiness, and disappointment. As I journey through this Advent season, it is the cry of my heart to come and ADORE Him, to allow Him to dispel the darkness that has crept in, and to allow Him to infuse my heart with the passionate desire to live according to the promises given, to celebrate with joy the peace that He offers, and exuberantly proclaim His unceasing love!

I believe this year has been a stretching one for many. I entered this year excited for many new beginnings; but, like many others, this year has had some major highs and lows. In the past, Christmas has been a time for me to reflect on all God has done and intentionally shift my focus. I feel it is a time to reconnect, celebrate, and reflect on all He has been doing. Today I'd like to invite you to join in on the cry of my heart to come and ADORE Him.

This Christmas, Lord, my desire is to...

A: Accept and allow You into that place of my heart that has grown distant and resistant. Come now and work in the secret chambers of my heart and break the bondage of the things that have distracted me or held me back from living in a way that honors You.

D: Decide to reverse the script of negative thinking and believe that You are not finished with me yet. *"Yes Lord, there is room for You here. Move in me. Change me. Rearrange me. Heal me."*

O: Order my steps towards forgiveness and away from bitterness. *"Help me to see others and myself as You do so I can mirror Your HOPE, PEACE, LOVE, and JOY more effectively."*

R: Renew the lovely and beautiful inside of me. *"Jesus, whisper reminders of life, humility, grace, gentleness, and the assurance of Your forever love. The chaos and my insecurities seem so much louder and I long for them to be uprooted from my life. Fill me with more of You."*

E: Endurance, Lord Jesus, give me the strength to endure. *"Even when circumstances beg me to grow cold, Lord, help me keep the flame of my first love burning so brightly that people are forced to consider how real You are... seeing less of me and more of You."*

The ADORE acronym originated from author Lysa Terkeurst, but these are just a few thoughts taken from my journal that my heart longs to soak in this Christmas. I hope they speak to you too. I'm praying that you experience the light

of Christ's love more than ever this season. Bask in His presence and radiate that peace that surpasses all understand!

May the God of all HOPE fill you with all JOY & PEACE in believing that you may abound in HOPE through the POWER of the Holy Spirit. - Romans 15:13

- Christie Hite

Prayer: Lord God, may all we see and do remind us of your love. Help us ADORE You this season! In Jesus' name, Amen.



Ellie LaForge (age 5)

December 7th

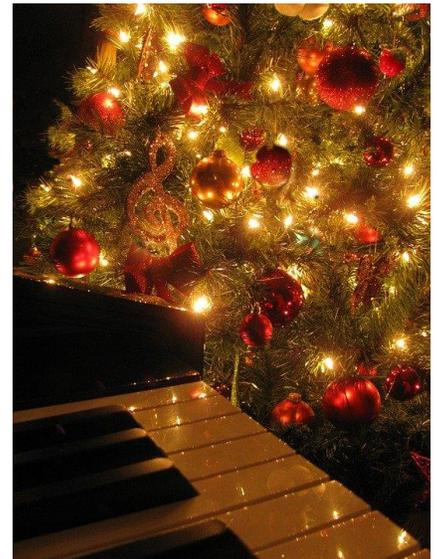
Christmas Music

If you know me you would know that I don't only listen to Christmas music during Christmas time. I listen to it all year round, even when it is blazing hot outside. I listen to it because it makes me feel hopeful, I have something to look forward to even when things are hard, and it makes me just feel happy in that moment. God is that way too, but He isn't on your radio station where you can press pause or rewind, He is with you all the time and never leaves your side. That's the one thing that just fascinates me, He is there and you don't need to call out for Him, He is there through the hardest times, and if you look around at all He has created even you - it is amazing!

Joshua 1:9 says, "To be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you may go."

This Advent season as you listen to Christmas music, think about how it makes you happy. Remember that unlike Christmas music, God is with us through all seasons of life.

Prayer: Dear Lord, Thank You for all You do for us and how You are always there for us. Help us to always know that You are there and You WILL be there during harsh times and good times all year round. In your heavenly name, Amen.



-Liza Evans Justesen



Hudson Lloyd (age 7)

December 8th

Every Christmas since our boys were born, I have made an ornament for them with what's gone on for each of them that year. Now I cross stitch one for each of them as well as our seven grandchildren. My family laughs at me because I vow not to take down our live Christmas tree until I have finished all nine of them. One year the tree came down, needles and all on February 1st!

As I put the ornaments on the tree each year it is fun to look back over the years and remember the various milestones over the years of their lives, good and sometimes not so good (losing a family pet, etc.) Obviously, this year two things on the ornaments will be COVID-19 and the happy return of Christopher from Kuwait. Looking at them reminds me of how blessed we are. As I reflect on the many blessings and gifts that God has given us, I know that His greatest gift is His son, Jesus Christ.

“And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you a child is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord” Luke 2:10-11.

As our family celebrates this year, I hope we will all remember above all else, the birth of the Savior.

Prayer: Loving God. Help us to put aside the trees, parties, and presents and celebrate the only gift that is important and worth celebrating...your Son, Jesus Christ. In His name, Amen.

- Betsy Collins



Kate Justesen (age 7)

December 9th

Am I My Brother's Keeper?

We have a dear friend Julia in Ninety Six who never ceases to amaze us with her love for God. Julia, a widow, is always praying for and helping others. She reminds us of a quote attributed to Pope Francis: "You pray for the hungry. Then you feed them. That is how prayer works."

In 2013, Julia, at age 78, got a call from her brother, Harold in NC, who was in extremely poor health and lived alone. He asked Julia if he could come live with her. Julia asked God, "am I my brother's keeper?" And according to Julia, God immediately replied, "yes, you are." So, Julia sent 2 relatives to bring him to her house. When we first met Harold he was in such bad shape that we (non-verbally) communicated to each other..."No way he's going to make it." But Julia got him in with her internist and Harold began to improve. She cleaned him up, prepared nutritious meals, got him some new clothes, etc. She began reading the Bible to him and praying with him. Once he regained his strength, she took him to her church, Mt. Olive Baptist. Harold recommitted his life to Jesus, joined the choir, and was transformed! One evening 2.5 half years after his arrival, we saw Harold as he was leaving a Bible Study at the 96 Depot. We couldn't believe the changes in him! So, we were totally blown away when only a couple of weeks later he died unexpectedly in his sleep. That was in the fall of 2016.

Long story short...Julia signed off on his funeral expenses assuming that between his life insurance and his Korean War Army benefits his expenses would be covered. His funeral expenses amounted to \$7800. After life insurance, the VA benefit, \$1,000 raised by Mt. Olive Baptist Church, and \$800 saved by Julia, the balance amounted to about \$5,000.

December 2017, a year later and the bills were still outstanding. The Go Fund Me platform had only been around a short while. We had never used it before and we were "technologically challenged." Although anxious we gave it a try. By the grace of God it worked and was on Facebook instantaneously! Damian Dominguez at the Index Journal graciously visited Julia and wrote a beautiful story on Harold and Julia for the newspaper. Then we prayed and waited...

In no time at all the Go Fund Me account took off! Due to the FaceBook platform being "re-shared," many times, donations came in from everywhere from folks who knew and loved Julia. Veterans contributed generously as well as strangers who none of us knew anything about. One man came to the door with \$1200 cash because his dad had also served in the Korean War. Many people in this very church graciously donated. In around 2 weeks the bill was paid!

Julia taught us a lot from her willingness to serve others. We saw how her influence transformed Harold's life. We learned that there are a lot of good folks in the world who are inspired by and who support all the "Julias" of this world...and

it takes BOTH! When I asked Julia's permission to share this story, she said "yes, someone may need this story."

- Frank and Penny Cannon

Prayer: Lord God, use us to help Your children, Lord. May what we do and say show them Your love! In Jesus' name, Amen.



Linsey Anderson

December 10th

What makes traditions so important to us as Christians? Why do we often "do" what our parents and grandparents did? Why do we repeat those same behaviors with our children and grandchildren? I think we'd agree that traditions are one way to share what we believe with those who are dear to us. . . a way to let symbols speak more profoundly than words ever could.

One very special Christmas tradition for our family is the Advent wreath. We made one with our children every Christmas Season from the time they were born until they left home to live on their own. The two of them participated yearly in making a wreath, lighting the candles, sharing a devotional, and blowing out the candles when we were finished (extinguishing the candles was their favorite part!). Often we sang a little song: "Light one candle for Hope (Peace, Joy, Love) . . . one bright candle for Hope." Many times my parents visited us during Thanksgiving so my mother helped assemble the Advent wreath along with our children. This year for the first time our oldest granddaughter will be with us for a weekend prior to Advent and will help make our wreath. I envision the two of us talking about the symbolism of the candles and the meaning associated with the wreath's round shape and its greenery. And, I can only imagine the fun we'll have as we create a beautiful wreath together! Our family's Advent wreath gives me a sense of connection with past generations and it connects me with our children and grandchildren even when they are sometimes far away during the holiday. The memories of Christmases past, the happiness of the present, and the hope of years to come are all wrapped up in our Advent wreath.

Perhaps you'd like to talk with your family about a special Christmas tradition. How does it symbolize your faith?

Let us pray: God of Light and Mercy, we thank You for this time of preparation and waiting before we celebrate Christmas Day. We pray that You will open our eyes and our hearts, direct our actions, and empower us by your Spirit to show Your hope, peace, joy, and love to those in our families, in our community, and throughout our world. In the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, Amen.

- Donna Thompson



Williamson twins (1985)

December 11th

The Family Christmas Tree . . . another chapter in the Hofsommer saga.

Christmas was getting closer, and the stress and exhaustion was growing by leaps and bounds. I really dreaded putting up all the decorations this year. It had been a tiring and discouraging year. As I hung each ornament on the tree, begrudgingly at first, I began thinking about what this Christmas tree really means to me, and why it was important to have this symbol in our home.

I looked at the tree and remembered how each glass or brass or crystal ornament was carefully chosen by us or our wonderful friends and family with much happiness bringing excitement to our hearts and delight to our eyes . . . what JOY!

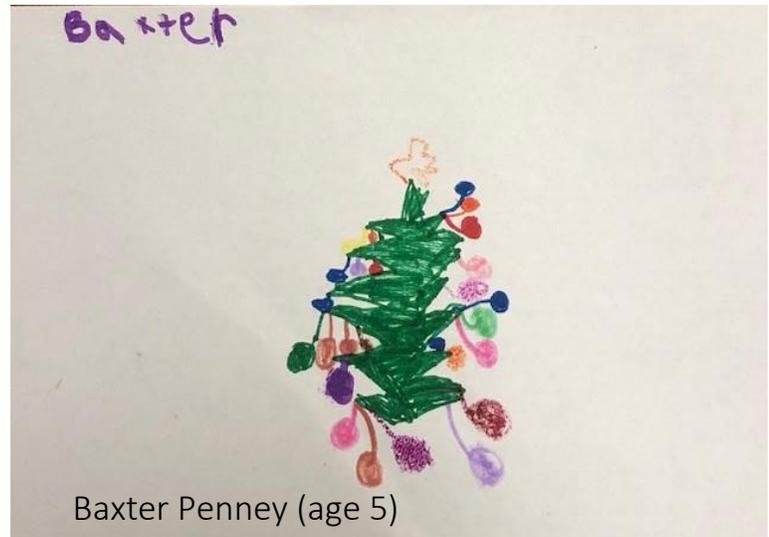
Memories of our family Christmases flooded my heart as I looked at the handmade ornaments, some crudely fashioned by childish hands, all made with expressions of undying and unselfish LOVE!

PEACE filled my heart as I carefully placed the Angel on the top, and the other angels round about, seemingly watching with caring eyes. As I gently rested the aging and “priceless” Nativity (which has survived all our years together, and has been broken and glued back together, but can NEVER be replaced because we love it!) underneath the tree, CONTENTMENT joined PEACE.

Then, with great anticipation, I put the plug into the socket, and the tree came alive with a colorful and dazzling array of lights . . . giving everything a sparkling and beautiful look of newness! Everything faded into the background in the room as we focused our sights on this wonderful vision of CHRISTMAS! The lights reminded me of the stars filling the heavens, and how the Brightest Star, on a Christmas so long ago caused everything to fade into the background . . . offering JOY, PEACE, CONTENTMENT, the greatest LOVE ever known, and visions of a newness in life, giving us encouragement to go on. Such gifts!

This is what I saw in my tree . . . I hope you see the same in yours. Merry Christmas!

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, our hearts are full of gratitude for the most precious and wonderful gift You have given us. May we always be happy to share this with



others as well. Thank You so much for this greatest of all blessings – Your Son – the perfect gift for us all. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

- Nancy Hofsommer (1991)



Will Pinson (age 6)

December 12th

We often hear people talk about getting in the Christmas spirit. The context of that is often something we have to do: decorate the house, buy the gifts, go to parties, etc. But what is the true spirit of Christmas? Is it worship? Is it Jesus? Is it giving rather than receiving? All are elements of Christmas, but they also apply other times of the year. So what is the spirit of Christmas?

Working for Hospice & Palliative Care of the Piedmont, our children have grown up spending a lot of time at First Baptist Church the week following Thanksgiving for the Festival of Trees. Every year they come after school and help with whatever project is going on that day to prepare for the event. While there, they also get to observe the men of the church prepare the manger scene outside the Fellowship Hall. The men carefully build the stable, then add the hay, animals, Mary, Joseph, and then the manger. The particular year of this picture, our kids questioned, "Where is baby Jesus?", so we inquired. We were told that baby Jesus doesn't come until Christmas Eve. So, we would drive by the church between then and Christmas to no baby Jesus being there and the kids would ask, "How much longer?" There was such anticipation for Him to arrive. On Christmas Eve, after our candlelight service, the kids had to go by to see if baby Jesus had arrived, he had not. We rode by on our way to see family on Christmas morning and still no baby Jesus. Finally, after lunch, we drove by to find that baby Jesus had arrived – such joy!

Christ's birth was not a one-day event, but a season of hope and anticipation. Advent should be a time that joyfully anticipates Christmas. You have 24 days to prepare. May we all be child-like again in our anticipation and be filled with the spirit of Christmas. This Advent, and every day for that matter, we should be as excited about Jesus as the angels were. "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" (2 Corinthians 9:15)

- Andrea Scott

Prayer: Lord God, open our hearts to the wonder and anticipation of this season. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Scott children (2011)

December 13th

“What to Expect When You’re Expecting Baby Jesus”

A few years ago when my wife and I found out she was pregnant, our world turned upside-down. After a day of sheer panicking, we realized that while we may have been materially unprepared for a child, we were immaterially prepared in the best way: our love for our son, even before he was born, was real. We knew that we would be able to make ends meet, make time, and make space for our son... and that we would love him no matter what. And that's all that really mattered at the end of the day.

The next day, I remember working on a collage poster as part of a team-building project, and so I filled the poster with all sorts of images from magazines that I felt reflected my personality. Food, music, beautiful vistas, things like that. After taking a step back from the poster, I realized that it was a snapshot of my world - a world that my son was coming into - a world full of food, music, and beautiful vistas. After he was born, what I also came to realize is that my son was also bringing something into my world. Hope and joy.

As I reflect on these things, I can only imagine that Mary and Joseph must have felt the same about their little baby with all the hope and joy He would bring into the world. As we try to make ends meet, and make time and space for the birth of Jesus, let us expect new opportunities to put first things first, and new chances to finally bury the hatchet and repair the brokenness of the world. After all, Jesus preached a message of justice, peace, and love - things we could use a little bit more of, especially these days. Merry Christmas!



- Gordon Tubbs (aka Rev. G)

Prayer: Lord God, help us make room for You first in all our plans and festivities! You are what makes it all worthwhile! In Jesus' name, Amen.



Lucy Jenks (age 4)

December 14th

Everyone who knows me well knows how much I love Christmas music. I start listening to Christmas music as soon as we put away the Halloween decorations and continue until the year ends. I even planned my wedding for December so that Christmas hymns could be played on the organ during the service.

My favorite hymn is "O Holy Night." This hymn, played by the violin, was the last hymn played before our wedding ceremony began. Anytime I hear Christmas carols it puts a smile on my face, but none have the same effect as "O Holy Night." This hymn brings back so many great memories of past Christmases; I can still hear my mother's voice singing this song as loud as she could in church.

With so many great Christmas hymns, I spent some time thinking about what made this hymn so special that I remember it more than all the others. I have determined that it is because the song depicts a glorious night in which the world was given hope. It is this hope that made the angels rejoice! It is this same hope that inspires me. Despite everything occurring in our world, this will not be the conclusion. Jesus' birth gave us all hope that through the salvation he offers to those that believe in him, we can rest in peace knowing that everything will be okay because of the hope he provides.

- Jessica Willard

Prayer: Lord God, You fill us with amazement! Thank You for wonders and glories that remind us of Your constant presence. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Keaton Willard (age 9)



Lyla Ray Steifle (age 3)

December 15th

I have always loved Christmas. I love everything about Christmas: the celebration of Jesus' birth, family gatherings, the spirit, the songs, the decorations, and Christmas parties where everyone wears their finest Christmas attire. All of the traditions of Christmas would make it my favorite time of year but two of the most important days of my life happened during the Christmas season.

First, I was lucky enough to have Lisa agree to marry on December 28th, 1991. First Presbyterian Church in Orangeburg was beautifully decorated for Christmas. I remember walking out with my father and watching my groomsmen and Lisa's bridesmaids walking down to join me at the altar. My family and future family were smiling brightly in the first few rows of the church. I was thinking that there could be never be a more beautiful sight. That memory quickly became a short lived most beautiful moment in my life as Lisa and her father, Buster, appeared at the back of the church. I will never forget how beautiful she looked that day as she made her way to me at the altar and that memory is etched permanently in my mind.

Second, the birth of our first child, Robinson, was on December 15th. Lisa and I were trying to finish our Christmas shopping on the 14th knowing that her due date of December 22nd was quickly approaching. The morning of the 15th, Robinson, being Robinson, decided that he didn't want to wait that long. Lisa being Lisa, had me stop by the post office on the way to the hospital to get stamps so that she could mail her Christmas cards before going to the hospital. Christmas was everywhere and Lisa and I were about to receive, in our minds, the second greatest Christmas gift from God.

God has blessed me in so many ways but two of my most treasured blessings happened during the Christmas season.

- Robbie Sanders

Prayer: Lord God, may we see the delights and joys before us as gifts of Your love. And, in the hard times, may we feel your closeness and compassion surrounding us with Your love and peace.. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Holden Epps (age 6)

December 16th

Recently, our family spent time talking about favorite Christmas traditions. Many of the memories the children shared centered around Christmas experiences at First Presbyterian Church. We are ever thankful for the people who have helped them learn the true meaning of Christmas! So many people have organized and volunteered with Christmas pageants, nativities, special services, caroling, Operation Christmas Child, Salvation Army bell ringing, birthday parties for Jesus and so much more!

We decided to share a family tradition that is significant, especially to our children. My mother, Margaret Moore, loves nativity sets. On a shopping trip with her sisters, she found an outdoor nativity, and she just had to have it! I don't know how they fit it into her Honda CR-V that day, but it would have been fun to watch that happen. The nativity set is large and beautiful, and it quickly became important to all of us.

Laura Margaret was a toddler when my mom and my step-father, Stan Moore, first put the nativity in their yard. Each year, Laura Margaret, Charlie, and Adam have been invited to help their grandparents take the nativity out of storage and carefully assemble it. Wise men, shepherds, angels and the other members of the story are usually pulled across the yard in an old wagon that used to carry the kids! Laura Margaret says they have fun doing it, but there is always a sense of reverence about pulling out these special symbols of the Christmas season. Adam says he is in charge of carrying Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus. Charlie says baby Jesus is handled carefully and put in place last. My mom takes lots of photos of the event. We can see how the kids have changed with each year the nativity has been used. The sweetest photos are of toddler Laura Margaret, toddler Charlie, and toddler Adam posing so sweetly with the baby Jesus and gently planting a kiss on his head. For the Fennell kids, this tradition with grandparents marks the beginning of the Christmas season. It is a reminder that despite the commercialism of Christmas and the seemingly endless list of things to do and places to go, the real reason for Christmas remains as first in our hearts. We are grateful to the grandparents, relatives, friends and church family that have taken time to teach our family about God's LOVE sent to us as a baby at Christmas to show us how to love each other and save us from our sins. May you and your family be filled with His peace during this Christmas season and in the year ahead.

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

- Isaiah 9:6

- The Fennell Family

Prayer: Lord God, thank You for the joy of seeing Christmas from a child's eyes no matter how old we are. Renew our wonder each year! In Jesus' name, Amen.



Laura Margaret and Charlie Fennell (2010)

December 17th

The year 2020 has been in many ways unimaginable, and everyone has begun to accept a new normal. Almost every part of our lives has changed, and at times it may seem as though even the Christmas season will have a hard time invoking the same beautiful feelings we have all felt in the past. Now seems more important than ever to take time to notice the beautiful symbols of God's love present all around, despite anything else happening in our lives.

As you notice stars, remember that the star is symbolic of the fulfillment of the promise that a new star would be born the night of Jesus's birth. They will be placed atop trees everywhere. As you notice Christmas wreaths adorning the doors of homes, churches, and businesses, be reminded of the crown of thorns that Jesus wore on the cross. They remind us that God's love is eternal, circular, without beginning or end. As you are buying, wrapping, giving, and receiving gifts, be reminded of the symbolism of the act of giving. We were given the greatest gift of all, God's son, Jesus Christ. As you notice and smell Christmas trees, be reminded of the precious gift of eternal life. And finally, as you notice the nativity sets, be reminded that God chose to bless us all through a family. Praise Him and give thanks for the beautiful gift of your family.

Symbolism is especially important because it reminds us of a greater being, reminding us to look beyond ourselves. During Advent this year, take the time to remember the truth the symbols point to, share them with your family, and reflect on their meaning.

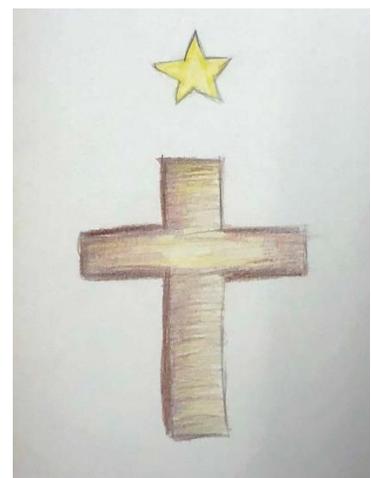
The child who was born to Mary and laid in a manger would one day grow up to die on a cross and rise again so each and every person who believes in Him may receive forgiveness for sin and eternity in heaven. - 1 Peter 1:3-4

- Merrie Wright

Prayer: Lord God, let us look for Your symbols and remember their true meaning! In Jesus' name, Amen.



Lucy Wright (age 6)



Lily Collins (age 13)

December 18th

A few weeks ago, I traveled to Montreat for a board meeting. While I was there, I had a little time to spare so I found a nearby trail and began to hike up the mountain. It was a steep climb straight up until it leveled off at the summit. Almost as soon as I reached the top, a gust of wind came ripping through the trees creating a frightening sound. Again, a gust blew and along with it a black storm cloud that seemed to blot out the afternoon light. Immediately, I returned to the trail and hurriedly made my way back down the mountain for safety. Ignoring the aches of old football injuries, a bad knee, and a weak ankle, I barreled forward. The wind did not let up, so down I went until finally I reached the bottom. I looked behind me to the mountain I quickly visited, and a silly reality washed over me. The rock on which that mountain rested was secure enough to hold me in a storm. Jesus used a storm to illustrate where someone should lay the foundation of their life. In Matthew 7, “a wise man built his house on the rock.”

Christmas is a reminder of our rock. While 2020 had its share of storms, our rock remains sturdy. We will celebrate the birth of Christ, like we do every year. Maybe this year we will steady ourselves on the foundation that the world could never move.

“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.” And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

- Matthew 7:24-29 (ESV)

- Kyle Hite

Prayer: Lord God, You are our rock. Don't ever let us forget that! In Jesus' name, Amen.

Lyle Clark (age 6)



December 19th

I love the entire nativity scene, but most especially baby Jesus lying peacefully in the manger. That simple, sturdy, utilitarian cradle holding the most priceless gift each of us will ever receive. God sent LOVE to us, from heaven to earth, wrapped in swaddling clothes, in the human form of Jesus. That pure, innocent baby has always been and will always be a symbol of hope, faith, and the undeniable truth of God's radical love for us for all eternity. For as long as I can remember, the most beautiful, meaningful gifts in my life are the ones given from the heart, filled with the most love - like thoughtfully handmade art from a grandchild.



Carson Riley (Toma's granddaughter)
(age 5)

Human beings are never happy because of that which surrounds them, but because of that which lies within them.

- Robert Ozment

Ah dearest Jesus, holy Child,
Make Thee a bed, soft undefiled
Within my heart, that it may be
A quiet chamber kept for Thee.

- Martin Luther

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because

God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

- I John 4:7-12

Prayer: Dear God, May the love Jesus brought to earth fill our hearts with love and compassion to share with others. In Jesus' name, Amen.

- Toma Mulkey

December 20th

A Partridge in a Pear Tree

One of my favorite Christmas memories growing up at FPC was going to Jesus' Birthday Party in Alexander Hall on the Sunday before Christmas. We would listen to several Christmas stories, sing songs together and finish off the celebration with a birthday cake for Jesus. Who doesn't love a birthday party with some delicious cake at 10:00 in the morning? As I grew older, I started helping with the Birthday Party for Jesus, and it has become a tradition for my mom and me to lead the group of children as we sing and dance to "The 12 Days of Christmas" and "Children Go Where I Send Thee." As a child, I mostly looked forward to trying to remember every word and dance move but as I grew up I came to understand what these songs truly represented. It was the true story of Christmas and why we were celebrating! In "The 12 Days of Christmas," each gift represents many different aspects of Christianity such as a "Partridge in a Pear Tree," representing Jesus Christ. In "Children Go Where I Send Thee," we are singing the story of Christmas morning and "little baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothing." This has become such a special tradition, and I love watching the children sing and dance year after year as we gather together to celebrate the birth of Christ!

- Lucy Stevens

Prayer: Lord God, we celebrate You in so many ways! Thank You for the delights of singing and dancing and cake! In Jesus' name, Amen.



December 21st

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

- Philippians 2:5-8

During Advent, we spend the majority of our time studying and meditating on the Christmas story as detailed in the Gospel according to Luke. We put up nativities, talk about the “reason for the season,” and quote Old Testament prophecies foretelling the birth of our Savior. However, we tragically overlook one of the most theologically significant aspects of the Christmas story: the incarnation of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Before the foundations of the world, Jesus was with the Father (John 1), entitled to all of the rights and privileges of being the infinite, all-powerful King of the universe. In Philippians 2:6-7, we see that Jesus, instead of continuing to enjoy His Heavenly dwelling, emptied Himself of His divine privileges by taking on flesh and being born of the virgin Mary, so that we might be forgiven of our sins.

Ponder what Christ taking on flesh would’ve looked like; He went from reigning on the throne of Heaven to being confined to the body of a small, weak infant, completely dependent on His parents. The Creator of the universe, who had needed nothing, became lowly, requiring food three times a day to prevent hunger and fatigue. Throughout His life, Jesus experienced thirst, illness, injury, and ultimately death. The limitations of His frail flesh, contrasting with his glorious, heavenly state, were utterly humiliating.

For the all-powerful God to stoop so low as to take on human form for the sake of His beloved creation would be an extraordinary and incomprehensible act of love by itself. However, Jesus continued to make known His love for us throughout His life, which ended with His brutal and public execution at the hands of the very people he came to save.

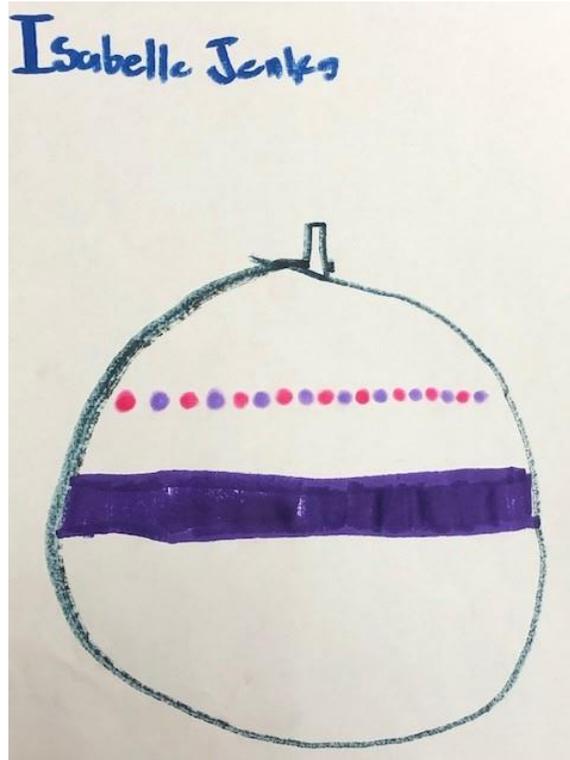
Therefore, do not let yourself be distracted by nativities and Christmas carols; remember the significance of the incarnation of Jesus Christ. For Him to



take on human form and be put to death on a cross was an act of love so great that we cannot even begin to understand its infinite depth.

- Eric Gardner

Prayer: Lord God, You gave up the wonders of heaven to live as a normal human. Help us to realize what a gift this is, and how vast Your love is for us. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Isabelle Jenks (age 9)

December 22nd

Growing up, Christmas was a magical time in my family – especially on Christmas Eve! We were fortunate to live a block from my grandparents and my extended family lived in town as well. Everyone always went to my grandparents' house for a fabulous Christmas Eve Dinner, complete with fine china, crystal, and wearing our "Sunday Best." Sounds easy enough, but in addition to my grandparents, there were their 4 children and their spouses, as well as 16 grandchildren. My grandmother insisted on cooking all the food and her cornbread dressing, oyster pie, divinity, and ambrosia were always the favorites. We had several "children's" tables and due to the size of the gathering, few of us ever graduated to the "grownup's" table. The best part of the night was the Christmas program planned by the grandchildren. My large family was very musical, so this became a major production of Christmas piano and vocal solos, duets, and readings - all the children participated. We had little Christmas Carol books and the whole family enjoyed singing our many favorite songs. The program always ended with the youngest grandchild reading the Christmas Story in Luke. It was never about the presents, but the tradition of our family celebrating the birth of Baby Jesus.

- Beth Meyer

Prayer: Lord God, Fill our hearts with Your love, so that they overflow to those around us – strangers and friends. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Olivia Wright (age 9)



Mayson Munnerlyn (age 8)

December 23rd

Christmas in Pakistan

Indeed, Christmas is the most JOYFUL time of the year and each country and culture celebrates this day according to its customs and traditions. Different people call it by different names to highlight the importance of this day. In Pakistan, most people call it *Barra dinn* (Urdu) and *Wadda dinn* (Punjabi) which means “The Big/Greatest Day.” It is called such because for Christians in Pakistan, it is the most important day of the entire year. It is a day when the grace and light (Jesus Christ) of God enter into the world to give salvation and eternal life.

So, preparations begin during the first week of December. Many people start preparing their homes by white washing/painting and cleaning their homes. For many poor families, Christmas is the time when they utilize their entire savings of the year to buy new clothes, shoes, etc. for their children and relatives. Young girls and women apply *hina* on their hands and wear bangles on their arms with new clothes. Young boys and church members decorate the outside of their homes and streets to share the story of Jesus’ birth. Also, all church buildings are decorated with lights and big stars etc. Carol singing and scripture memorization competitions are very common among different churches. Carol singers roam around all night visiting the homes of different people and they are warmly welcomed.

Traditionally, it is very common for parents to send gifts and sweets to bless their married daughters and their households. The daughters too, await with expectations for her family to bring a Christmas gift to her and her in-law’s. It is considered a sign of love and care and also to honor the daughter. Then on Christmas Eve, everyone stays up late and keeps their eyes on the clock waiting for it to strike 12:00 am and thus, the celebration of Christmas begins with great joy and enthusiasm. Everyone greets each other with saying, “MERRY CHRISTMAS TO YOU! HAPPY CHRISTMAS! *BARRA DINN MUBARAK! WADDA DINN.*”

“*MUBARRAK*” means good/blessed/joyful wishes. The elders of the families give blessings by putting their hands on the children for long life, peace, love, and unity; while young ones hug each other. On the streets, youth with their elders ignite fireworks to express joy and happiness for this great day.

Indeed, Christmas season is also an opportunity to share the peace of Christ with their Muslim neighbors. Typically, it is done by sharing dry and fresh fruits, sweets and gifts. Some churches and Christian organizations arrange special dinners and invite government officials to build relationships and share the joy of Christmas. Many people stay awake all night and then attend Christmas morning worship. This morning worship is the most important worship of the year. No one wishes to miss this service. There is no concept of Santa coming on Christmas morning. Everyone opens their gifts during the month of the Christmas whenever they want to. Just like anywhere else in the world, Christmas dinner is the most

important meal for relatives, friends and all the loved ones to gather to enjoy the fellowship and share their lives with each other. In Pakistan the Christmas dinner is usually arranged at the churches right after the worship service.

God became human in Jesus Christ to show that this entire world is loved by God. He was born in Bethlehem to show that every piece of land belongs to God and is His footstool. He was born at the right time by God's grace and will and now we can celebrate his birth in every age and place on earth! Thus, now we can joyfully celebrate and announce this *Good News* to the whole world. Indeed, it's a BIG day and we can share the story of Jesus Christ with every place and generation including Pakistan. Praise be to God! Barra Din Mubarak to you All!

- Samar Din

Prayer: Lord God, You are celebrated all over the world. Help us to remember our neighbors near and far this season. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Isabella Din (age 8)

December 24th

Every year we put up three Christmas trees in our house. One is an already decorated tree we purchased from the annual Hospice Festival of Trees; one is a large family tree decorated with a hodge-podge of ornaments; and the other one is “Addy’s tree” - named because of the many handmade ornaments that our daughter has made over the years. Many of them were made in Noah’s Ark preschool.

But there are also many ornaments from my grandmother’s tree that are very old and very delicate. I can remember helping her decorate her tree and it warms my heart to know I still have these special ornaments. The tree is even topped with an electric star that she had when she was newly married so it must be around 70 years old. There are some ornaments that she made while living at an assisted living here in Greenwood the last few years of her life.

To say my grandmother and I were close is an understatement. She was a beacon of light and stability in my shaky childhood. My grandmother was the biggest influence on my Christian faith. She always said that she strived to be a “Proverbs 31” woman. She worked hard, she was generous and faithful, and honored God in everything she did and didn’t do. I especially feel her with me as I decorate that tree and when I am singing hymns at our Christmas Eve service. She went with us many times and loved that service as do I. I am blessed to have had this “Proverbs 31” woman as a shining example in my life.

- Laine Orcutt

Prayer: Lord God, thank You for those whom have shaped our faith. In turn, make us carefully aware of the lives we influence. In Jesus’ name, Amen.



Eva Rose (age 4)



Mills Anderson (age 5)

December 25th

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."



Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

- Luke 2: 1-20

Merry Christmas!