



2022 Advent Devotional

lovingly shared with and by the members of

First Presbyterian Church

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Advent Schmadvent!

Now that's a Christian bah-humbug! We're really not interested in Advent – we want Christmas!!!! I know I do. I want to sing Christmas carols from Halloween through Christmas. Yep, I want to decorate then, too. Don't judge!

So why should we even acknowledge Advent? Well, let's think of it this way. On a tombstone you see a birth date and a death date separated by a dash.

Let's say the birthdate represents the very first Christmas – the beautiful story of Jesus coming to earth, human and divine, to live among God's children.

Now let's say the death date is when Jesus comes again. None of us know when it will be or how it will be. It's a mystery and can sometimes seem scary if you take Revelation literally instead of symbolically.

Well, the dash is the time in between. Each moment we live and breathe in between Christ's first and second coming.

As much as we celebrate the original Christmas, friends, we will celebrate Christ's final return even more. We just don't understand what that may look like and it's hard to anticipate the intangible. So, we rally the cry for Christmas, not Advent! I get it.

But, in our hearts, could we honor Advent like I tend to honor the sea which represents beauty, wonder, desire, power, danger, caution, depths, and mystery.

As you read this devotional written by our FPC family, I pray you will be filled with the wonder of hope, the intrigue of the mystery of unconditional love, the calm only achieved through His peace, and the joy that surpasses understanding.



Thank you to all the contributors of devotions, photos, and art.
Unless otherwise noted, the art/photo(s) were submitted by the devotion author.
Booklet lovingly compiled by Elise Collins and Lea Jones.

Sunday, November 27th



Color the far left candle purple and color its flame

Advent Wreath – HOPE

In the Old Testament, Isaiah warned the people of Israel that their choices would have consequences. Sadly, the consequences were captivity and exile. But even though God dispenses justice, he always offers mercy as well. Isaiah prophesied in chapter 9 verses 2, 6, and 7:

*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.
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.
Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and
upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.*

We light the purple candle of **hope**. (Color in one candle).

Prayer: Lord God, we make choices every day that have consequences – some good, some not. Thank you that we never have to lose **hope** in you. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Sing: O Come, O Come Emmanuel (88, verses 6 and 7)

O come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer
Our spirits by Thine advent here;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night
And death's dark shadows put to flight.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, desire of nations, bind All peoples in one heart and mind;
Bid envy, strife, and discord cease; Fill the whole world with heaven's peace.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel Shall come to thee, O Israel.

(from *O Come, O Come Emmanuel*)

Monday, November 28th

Without the manger, there would be no cross. Have you ever thought of that? The balance of life and death, good and evil, happy and sad, hope and despair. Would we sacrifice the good in order to avoid the bad? Would we wish not to love rather than to have our hearts potentially broken when we feel loss or suffering? I am going to be bold and make the assumption that most of us feel that good times are worth the bad.

God clearly felt that way! God sent his son to earth knowing the trials that would occur. But the good things – like Jesus living among us, feeling what we feel, healing the sick, loving the sinners, offering hope to so many far outweighed the betrayal, denial, and suffering he experienced. How do I know? Because he did it for us. And it didn't end there.

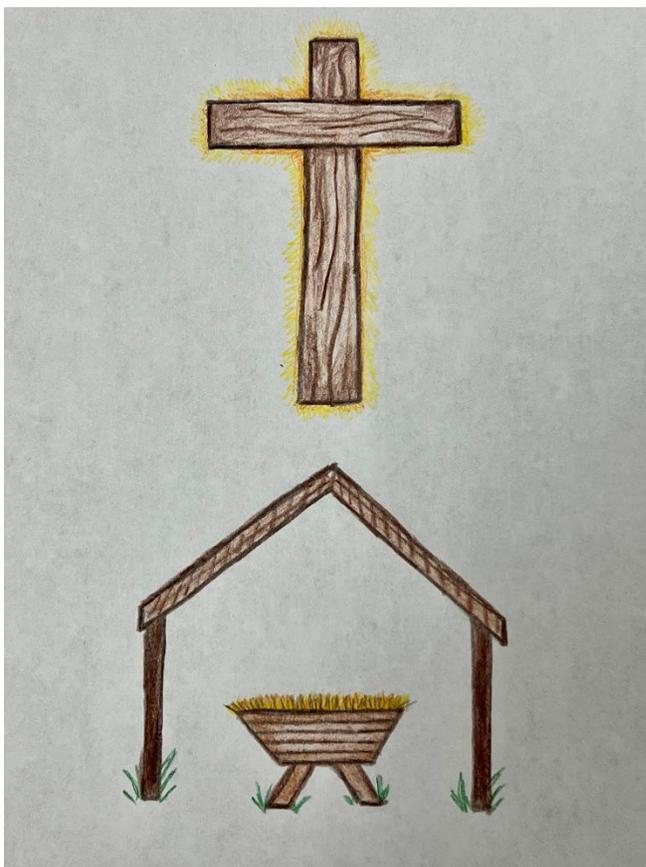
Jesus knew suffering and death weren't the end – they were only temporary. He rose from the dead and walked among his friends again before returning to his place with God.

God knows we will experience joys and sorrows, but it is all worth it because in the end, we'll be with him.

God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes. There shall be no more death. Neither shall there be any more sorrow nor crying nor pain, for the former things have passed away.

- Revelation 21:4

-Elise Collins



Prayer: Lord God, give us courage when we walk through trials. Fill us with your peace and patience as we grow ever nearer to you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Emma Collins

Tuesday, November 29th

Isaiah 60:2-3

For behold, darkness will cover the earth,
And deep darkness the peoples;
But the LORD will rise upon you.
And His glory will appear upon you.
And nations will come to your light,
And kings to the brightness of your rising.

Once upon a time there was a theological train of thought that held (contrary to scripture) that humanity, enlightened with scientific and sociological knowledge, would progress in peace and understanding to the point where the “kingdom of God” would be achieved. The gross atrocities of WWII obliterated the popularity of that notion. Many in our reformed tradition that had bought into the “what we believe, we can achieve” were sorely disappointed. Instead of “reforming according to the Word of God” many have indiscriminately adopted similarly flawed views, missing the awesome depths of depravity to which we sink, and the UNEQUAL magnanimity, lovingkindness, grace, mercy, and sacrificial love which God has planned for our rescue!

These few verses extend the promise for our salvation from sin, death, and hell. My favorite word in the Bible, “but”—is a connector between a hopeless situation, and a God who infuses hope!

Darkness—can there really be any debate that we are walking in darkness, which seems to get darker every day? Dreadful. BUT the Lord will rise upon you. Not because we will it so, but because HE wills it so. Good thing it’s not up to us. We have a 100% history of failure, BUT God has a 100% history of faithfulness.

I am much more moved by the Christmas story, knowing the implications (past AND future) of the “Advent” (“waiting for the coming”). I hope you are, too.

- Steve Skinner

Prayer: Lord God, we love the merriment of Christmas, but help us pause to ponder that we await your return. Glory! In Jesus’ name, Amen.

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Original image from <http://cruzblanca.org/hermanoleon/>

Wednesday, November 30th

Where are you on your Christian journey? One of the first sermons I heard Pastor Kyle preach when I rejoined First Presbyterian Church involved his invitation to the congregation to start a journey with him to examine our life's voyage in knowing Christ. As we filed out of the sanctuary, I am sure many of you did what I did and said to Kyle, "Yes, I accept that challenge for this journey."

While I knew I was a Christian, I had to ask myself was I really a true Christian? This is an easy thought to hold but upon a thorough self-examination, I had to say I was not the Christian I needed to be. I was a Christian observer but not a Christian participant. To expand this thought even further, participants act. What should I do to act upon the challenge Pastor Kyle posed to us?

John 12:26 (ESV) "If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him." This verse says it all. In our servanthood, our love for the Father shows through our acts. What is Jesus all about anyway? Love, peace, kindness, patience, acceptance, forgiveness plus many more wonderful things. To participate as a Christian, we must ask for Jesus' love to be a part of our lives.

We should be ever so grateful for our committed church staff. Pastor Kyle, Brad, Gordon, Elise, Steve, Lauren, Lea, Nan, and Vince all provide for our church family. The teaching and learning mission for our congregation begins with them. We are so fortunate to have individuals who are always thinking, planning, and organizing the foundations for sermons, music, classes, and Sunday School.

During our celebration of Jesus' birth, we Christians come together to share in the miracle we know. I remember during Covid our church staff laboriously collected recordings of FPC children in their homes talking about Christmas and what Jesus' birth meant to them. How authentic and touching were the true expressions of love from these little children! God's love for us definitely shows through in Christ's birth. A cross displayed in our yard and made by my nephew is a daily reminder that God is ever present in our hearts and minds. As we celebrate Jesus' birth, always remember John 3:16-17 (ESV). "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Amen.

-Joyce Brown

Prayer: Lord God, we observe you and wonder at how good you are! Fill us with the desire and to shift from being onlookers to being followers and doers. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Thursday, December 1st

O Christmas Tree!

An old German legend has it that Martin Luther, the great mover and shaker of the Protestant Reformation, was walking home through the woods one winter night when he was struck by the beauty of the stars shining down through the trees. Wishing his wife were there to see this glorious sight, he cut down a fir and took it home to light with candles. This was the first Christmas tree!

Fast forward to the twentieth century . . . When I was growing up in the country, my father always cut down a fresh cedar from the woods on our property, loaded it onto his pickup, and brought it home to be decorated in our living room. I can remember the pungent scent of the cedar branches permeating the air and setting the mood for Christmas. Large colored lights appeared every year along with old-fashioned shiny balls, elves cut out from Christmas cards, a silver garland, and sparkling silver tinsel. One year we strung popcorn for the garland and, later on, my brother Lane decided he would sample some. He ended up pulling the whole tree down!

My favorite Christmas tree memory is about my mighty mama chopping down a cedar in the woods and pulling it home all by herself. My father was working and Lane and I were sick and home from school. We were missing “Holiday House,” an event hosted annually by Kennedy Street Elementary School on the last day before Christmas break. We were not happy about missing the decorations and refreshments. Each classroom had gone all out to decorate with a different Christmas theme. Anyway, Mighty Mama went out to the woods, found the right tree, and chopped it down. Then she started pulling the tree home. Things went smoothly at first, but then the tree started feeling heavier and heavier. So, my determined mama stopped, chopped off some limbs, and kept going. When the tree was decorated, it looked just as beautiful as always! The chopped off part must have been turned toward the wall.

In another German legend, Martin Luther is quoted as saying that Christmas trees symbolize the goodness of God. Indeed, the goodness of God who sent His only Son to redeem us and to show us how to live and love others. May we all, not only at Christmas, but all through the year show the great, selfless love of God to others . . . those who are different from us . . . those we don’t agree with . . . those we don’t know but can help with a donation of time, monetary assistance, or a smile. May God’s love shine through us like the light shining through Luther’s Christmas tree, like the selfless mother who went out into the cold to chop down a tree for her children.

Merry Christmas!

-Nancy Wilson

Prayer: Lord God, May we be mindful of our loved ones and strangers who may need an extra dose of Christian Christmas cheer this year. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Dawsey Collins

Friday, December 2nd

Broken, breaking, patched back together, or being patched back together. As much as Christmas is touted as a merry holiday, it can also be tinged by sadness or melancholy.

I am blessed with an amazing family and the means to provide a comfortable Christmas. But I often experience shopper's remorse thinking about people who don't have as much. So, my joy is dampened by empathetic grief for struggling families.

Sometimes the festivity of the current Christmas is dampened as we reflect on Christmases past, and the precious people no longer present with us.

We may even feel lonely even when among a crowd of people.

Maybe our grief is anticipatory. We fear for future Christmases and mourn this may be a season of lasts.

The merriment of the season reaches our smiles, but not our eyes. We hide the struggles, pain, grief, burdens, fears, and whatever else disheartens us.

It's okay to feel that way.

Know that our good God must have felt both joy and grief when he sent his son to live among us. Joy to offer such a precious gift to his children. Grief knowing how his son would be treated and what he would experience at the hands of the same children for which he came.

So, when you feel blue or low or sad or heartbroken, it's okay. Let God share in your pain.

With each year, we will have more to celebrate and more to grieve. Just remember that God journeys with us doubling our joys and halving our heartaches. He shares in our experiences. And he offers hope in the form of fond memories, thankful hearts, and precious people coming in and out of our lives impacting and shaping us all along the way.

There's a song that just came to mind. Honestly just the chorus – I have no recollection of the verses (disclaimer), but the chorus says:

Joy and pain Like sunshine and rain

The music is upbeat and energetic and catchy – and so is this message. In this life, we will have joy and pain in seasons and sometimes simultaneously just like we have some days of sunshine and some days of rain and occasionally a glimpse of both. But every day that there is rain, remember the sun is still shining no matter how difficult it is to see.

That tiny baby became a man willing to die on the cross for us and walk every step of our journey with us having experienced exactly the same emotions you feel. You are never alone.

- Elise Collins

Prayer: Lord God, sit with us when we need your presence and comfort in a special way. Fill us with hope, love, and peace as only you can. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Lily Collins

Saturday, December 3rd

In thinking about memorable Christmas traditions, there were so many that came to mind. One stuck out in my mind as having the SPIRIT of CHRISTMAS!

As a kid I never liked this tradition! My mom would spend hours preparing and gathering gifts/baked goods to send to every neighbor, especially those that lived alone. Then she would send Margaret and I out for delivery to each house. Next, we would go with my mom to several nursing homes to visit several people who my mom knew needed some extra love at Christmas time. Looking back now, I think about how this wasn't "fun" to me, but how my mom's actions showed me an important message about Christmas. That it's about caring for others and sharing God's gift of Jesus at Christmas time! He is the greatest gift! I hope I can start a similar tradition with my own children to teach them that Christmas is about others, not just ourselves.

Prayer: Dear God, Thank you for Christmas - the lights, the Spirit, the gifts! Help us to remember the lonely and forgotten this Christmas! Help us to share Jesus with others, especially now. Lord, we love you and all of the joy you give us during this season! Amen.

"Jesus himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" Acts 20:35

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

-Dale Culbertson



Mills Anderson, age 7

Sunday, December 4th



Color the two far left candles purple and color their flames

Advent Wreath – LOVE

A man named Joseph was betrothed to Mary and married her even when he found out she was pregnant with the Lord's son. Joseph and Mary were filled with love for their baby before he was even born. They cared for him and loved him as a baby in a manger, as a child in their home, and as a man who would do miracles, preach God's word, and suffer and die for us. What great love is this among parents and children. Likewise, God loves us so much he sent his very own son to live among us as one of us – feeling what we feel and living like we live. What great love is this that God has for us – his children.

We light the purple candles of hope and love.

Prayer: Lord God, sometimes it is hard to fathom the vast love you have for us, but we praise you and ask that we be better able to share your love with others. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Sing: Love Has Come (110) (to the tune of "Bring A Torch, Jeanette Isabella")

Love has come, a light in the darkness!
Love shines forth in the Bethlehem skies.
See, all heaven has come to proclaim it;
See how their song of joy arises:
Love! Love! Born unto you a Savior!
Love! Love! Glory to God on high.

Love is born, come share in the wonder;
Love is God now asleep in the hay.
See the glow in the eyes of his mother;
What is the name her heart is saying?
Love! Love! Love is the name she whispers;
Love! Love! Jesus, Immanuel.

Love has come, He never will leave us!
Love is life everlasting and free.
Love is Jesus within and among us;
Love is the peace our hearts are seeking.
Love! Love! Love is the gift of Christmas;
Love! Love! Praise to You, God on high!

Monday, December 5th

Fear not for I bring you tidings of great joy that shall be for all people. For unto you, is born this day in the city of David a savior who is Christ the lord. And this shall be a sign unto you, you shall find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes laying in a manger. And suddenly, there was with the angel a multitude of heavenly host praising God and saying peace on earth goodwill toward man.

-Luke 2:10-14

Each Christmas morning, I recite this as my first present before opening the rest. I try to imagine what it must have been like to see and hear such a sight. To try to grasp the heavens opening up and God's messengers letting me know about this miracle. Trying to understand what a baby had to do with all of this. Rushing to go see what has happened and barging in on a new family. A new baby is a breath-taking miracle in itself but adding a savior to it. I can't imagine! What an overwhelming gift and such love! Beyond explanation and comprehension. My hope for each of us this Christmas is that the excitement of this miracle fills us all.

-Phyllis Collins

Prayer: Lord God, help us pause in wonder at the way you reveal your wonders to us. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Tuesday, December 6th

Age-Appropriate Gifts

The Magi saw the star from afar and traveled to worship the Christ Child. They brought him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. We understand the significance of each of those gifts to pronounce the kingship, deity, and death of Jesus. We can imagine the solemn occasion and formality of the Magi as they bowed before Jesus and worshiped him. But what infant child has any interest in gold, frankincense, and myrrh? None that I know of. In fact, these gifts seem terribly inappropriate. If it is for the parents, they may appreciate nice bedding, diapers, or a free babysitter. If it is for the baby, he would get more use out of a teething toy, a new outfit, or a rattle.

The tradition of gift giving has continued as an important part of remembering the birth of Christ. Today we spend much time and money choosing the perfect gift for our loved ones. Some people are wonderful gift givers. They tend to have a knack at finding something different, useful, and meaningful. Others struggle to make these three come together. Some gifts obviously had a lot of thought put into them. Some gifts are acquired in last minute desperation. Some gifts are straight from a wish list. Whether the gifts end up being perfect or not, the receiver always needs to remember "It is the thought that counts."

The thought is the key to any gift. For Christmas, the thought of a gift is the most important aspect. We give gifts to remember the best gift we have ever received – Jesus Christ. Every year we remember the gift of Christ by giving to others. Our hope is that the gift will elicit a smile, appreciation, and love, because from Christ we find joy, thanksgiving, and love.

This Christmas may we give and receive with more regard to joy, thanksgiving, and love. May we remember our ultimate gift found in Jesus Christ. And may we smile even if this year's gift is terribly inappropriate.

-Kyle Hite

Prayer: Lord God, inspire in us a wisdom to know just what to get for others. Gifts that speak love. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Emma Collins

Wednesday, December 7th

As long as I can remember, my family has attended or participated in the Christmas Eve service at church. Either one of my siblings or I have been an “actor” in the play, or my mom has been a director of the play. I was an angel, a lamb, and even Mary, and I helped with costumes, cleaning up after the service, and have helped with the little actors and actresses during the play. Being a part of this service year after year has been a constant in our family and is the beginning of our annual Christmas family festivities. I know the four- and five-year-old children do not know what an important part each of them plays for so many of our church members. Each role in the play is so important in telling the greatest story ever told- the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ. Of course, Mary and Baby Jesus are the centerpieces of this story. Mary, the virgin, is the chosen vessel to give birth to the King. Just her ability to ride a donkey all the way to Bethlehem while nine months pregnant and then giving birth to her baby in a dirty stable surrounded by animals makes her amazing. And Jesus is the King, the Messiah, our Savior. But all of the other roles in this story are equally important.

Joseph had to believe the words that came to him in a dream when an angel spoke to him and told him his virgin fiancé was going to give birth to the Messiah. Not only did he have to trust the angels in his dream, but he also had to trust Mary. And then he had to raise the Messiah. Joseph trusted in God to give him wisdom and strength. He is an amazing role model for all of us.

And then there is the Innkeeper. He is a very important part of the story too. He could have made an excuse not to let Mary have a place to stay. Instead, he gave them a place to rest and this place became the place where Jesus was born. The Innkeeper reminds us to make room for Jesus, even when you don't have time or enough room. We should all make generous space in our hearts this Christmas for Christ.

The beautiful angels were heavenly beings sent by God to tell the news of Jesus' conception and His birth. What an important role to be the ones to tell everyone about Jesus. The angels remind us to share the good news about Jesus every day!

The shepherds remind us that even the poorest or the least of these have important roles in the eyes of God. They are the ones the angels sang to telling the good news that the Messiah had been born. Sometimes it is difficult to see that God gives His Glory to everyone. We just have to open our eyes to His Glory and accept it.

The animals in the stable are just so happy to accompany the shepherds. They just wanted to be close to the little baby. This reminds us to be happy and do everything to grow closer to Jesus.

The wisemen risked their lives to travel to see the baby, and with them, they took gifts for the King. Remember during Christmas as we give gifts to each other that we should also do as the wisemen did and give gifts to Jesus - gifts of our heart.

And finally, the star. This bright constellation was the light that showed the world where the newborn King was born. Everyone followed the star to see the baby. This reminds us that finding Jesus is not hard. You may have to work to be with Him but finding him is easy because His light is the brightest of all.

So this Christmas season, don't just do what Jesus did, follow the examples of all of the people and parts of the Christmas story. Let the little actors from our Christmas Eve service guide you to grow closer to Christ!

An angel of the Lord appeared to 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."

-Luke 2: 9-11

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for family traditions. Thank you for our church where every person, young and old, is important. Thank you for little children who are willing to stand before us and show us the greatest story ever told- the birth of your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. As we think about the Christmas story, help us to see how each part of the story is important in teaching us how to bring Christ into our hearts this holiday season. Amen

- Margaret Stevens



Emma Collins, Amelia Scott, and Margaret Stevens
as Kindergarteners in our 2010 nativity – now they're seniors!

Thursday, December 8th

This is Ernest, our first beagle, tearing into his Christmas present like...well, like a child at Christmas.

Over the years, we've had many dogs, and every year, of course, they're included in the Christmas giving. Every year their present—a giant rawhide chew, a packet of smelly treats, a bone with peanut-butter filling—is wrapped, just like everyone else's. And every year we humans wait with special anticipation for the dog to open his or her present.

We usually save that moment for last; we wait for that final burst of floppy energy and slobbery excitement that only a dog (or toddler) can bring to such an occasion. And every year, every Christmas since Ernest, the dogs have disappointed us.

It seems that most dogs don't get it. They couldn't care less about a treat wrapped in colorful paper. They're even less excited about being packaged themselves, wearing tacky bows or sweaters or antlers. Most of the time, they look at the human wildly waving the present under their nose like, "So, when are you going to open that thing?"

Ernest was the only one who got into Christmas like...well, like a child. And I think that's why we keep up the ritual. To remember. To remember the child-like excitement and sheer JOY at the gift of Christmas! To remember that the Word became flesh, wrapped up, as a child. To remind ourselves that we are still children of God-with-us. Thanks be to God. Ah-oo-oo-h! (that's beagle for Amen!)

-Brad Christie

Prayer: Lord God, fill us with child-like excitement this season. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Friday, December 9th

A Caribbean Charlie Brown Tree

Christmas trees weren't really a thing in the Caribbean, but mom and dad were always so good about keeping our traditions wherever we were and however we could. I remember going out with my dad and brothers up the road between our manse and the church. The weather was warm as usual - I was in shorts. We found a tree branch that would do and Dad cut it down. We carried it the short way home and somehow Dad improvised a way for it to stand up. We decorated it with what we could find and voila! Christmas tree.

Despite the puny condition of the decor, just having the tree changed the atmosphere. We were excited to get it together and to decorate it together because it was a tradition for our family.

Even though it wasn't cold, we had no other family around, we wouldn't have the traditional meal, and our presents would be sparse, we still celebrated a Caribbean Christmas and it was just right because we had each other.

Sometimes life may not feel like it usually does or like we think it should. But that doesn't have to be a bad thing - just a different thing. Make the most out of it and find meaning in what is most important . . .

- Elise Collins

Prayer: Lord God, delight us with traditions old and new – may we feel your presence in the small and simple things. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Saturday, December 10th

The Old Rugged Stable

At our house, we have a small, inexpensive, wooden stable that has had presents dropped on it and is falling apart. When I bought it years ago, the stable came with a small set of inexpensive ceramic characters of the nativity. It's not fancy. It's not really even pretty. But this small creche is my favorite one to put out each year. It is the first gift that goes under the tree and serves to remind me, and hopefully my family, that the baby Jesus is the greatest gift that I could ever give or receive. The modest decoration also reminds me that the Christmas present of the baby Jesus doesn't cost me anything nor can I do anything to deserve it. The wooden stable reminds me of the old rugged cross that was always in the shadow of the stable.

I love the glittery, fancy and beautiful ornaments and decorations, but the old rugged stable with its tattered characters will forever be my favorite.

God sent his Son into the world so that that world through Him might be saved.

- John 3:16

- Kim Purcell

Prayer: Lord God, a meager stable and an old rugged cross were good enough for our Lord. Keep us humble. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Sunday, December 11th



Color the 1st, 2nd, and 4th candles purple and color their flames.
If you want, the 4th candle can also be pink instead of purple.

Advent Wreath – JOY

On a cool night while shepherds rested among their sheep, an explosion of light burst from the sky as an angel greeted the sleepy shepherds saying:

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.”

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: 10-14, 19-20)

We light the purple candles of hope, love, and joy.

Prayer: Lord God, you alone can fill us with such abundant joy. May we seek out the joy in every circumstance we encounter. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Sing: Joy to the World (134)

Joy to the World, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And Heaven and nature sing,
And Heaven and nature sing,
And Heaven, and Heaven, and nature sing.

Joy to the World, the Savior reigns!
Let men their songs employ;
While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat, repeat, the sounding joy.

He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders, wonders, of His love.

Monday, December 12th

When I was a child, my family and I went to visit friends during the Christmas break. In their home they had a large and extensive collection of treasures that took up the entire wall in their family room. After gazing for a very long time in amazement at the enormity of the display, my mother, Jill Koczwara, told me a collection was anything of three or more. Although overwhelmed, I thought that was something I could take on and accomplish even as a child. My first collection was stickers. I have since moved onto other collections such as vintage Christmas ornaments and photos of our children, Barrett and Margaret, with Santa each year that I put in silver frames. The fun part of collecting antique Christmas ornaments is that you never know where you might find them. When I do, it's always a moment of surprise and joy. The photos of the children with Santa are also a collection of surprise and joy. The photos taken each year capture the happiness and excitement of the season in their faces that I'm certain I'll never forget. But I do forget! I often forget yesterday. Being able to pull the collection of photos out each year is a fun reminder of our children as babies and their joys of Christmas. It also reminds me that God sent his baby, so that we can rejoice in the gift of eternal life as a gift for us to accept and share with others.

"Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!"

- Psalm 32:11

- Laura Fleming

Prayer: Lord God, we praise you for smiling faces filling us with joy! In Jesus' name, Amen.



Tuesday, December 13th

Do you ever feel like God intentionally puts obstacles in your way—a loss, a conflict, a disappointment? Many have questioned God’s sovereignty or his love when going through those dark valleys of life. But Isaiah 40 tells us:

He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint.

But too many times we concentrate on the bad, or the disappointment, all the time not seeing the good obstacles purposefully put in our path.

I was hunting vigorously one day and was very disappointed my feathery foe (a wild turkey) had eluded me again; tired and disappointed, I almost tripped over a beautiful patch of wild paperwhites. Out in the middle of nowhere, in full bloom. I could see no reason for their existence, except a divine message to me saying “slow down, be still, enjoy the beauty all around!” It brought a tear to my eye, feeling his presence, and I did sit and rest, gazing on their isolated beauty. So many times we focus on our troubles and sorrows, and we fail to see the small beauties all around us, amidst of all our troubles. These subtle gifts, although easy to miss, remind us that God is with us, even in our disappointments. With these little surprises, he gives us hope and encouragement, telling us to stop, be still, and know I am your God.

-Jukie Leary



Prayer: Lord God, slow our pace and open our eyes to see your wonders this season. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Wednesday, December 14th

Role of a Christian Grandmother

Psalm 103:7 But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children.

Proverbs 17:6 Grandchildren are the crown of the aged, and the glory of their children is their feathers.

One of the greatest blessings from God was when I became a mother. But becoming a grandmother, as you grandmothers would agree, tops it all. So, what is my role as a Christian grandmother? As Kyle mentioned in our Kirkin' o' the Tartans service, praying for our grandchildren is so important. I pray daily that my sweet grandson will continue to come to saving faith as he grows up. Also, it's important to tell him how much Jesus loves him. It's important our grandchildren know we all make mistakes, but that God forgives us of our sins.

May God bless all the children and grandchildren of the church and Akers and I wish each of you a Merry Christmas!

- Rebecca Wise

Prayer: Lord God, give us strength and courage to bear Christian witness. Thank you for the precious joys in our lives. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Thursday, December 15th

We made a Christmas card years ago from an old photo taken at my Grandmother Etta Blake Patterson's living room in Ninety Six circa 1938. JoEtta was named for her and our grandfather Joel Patterson. Etta's folks were active members of First Presbyterian, Greenwood long ago. Some of those memorial plaques in Alexander Hall were her folks.

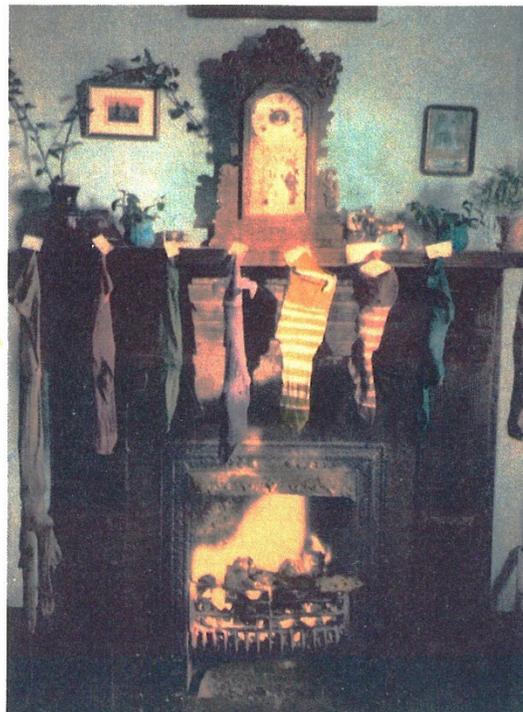
Etta Blake grew up in Greenwood. I guess she was originally a member of First Pres, Greenwood. Our daughter is named Blake and she was a graphics major. She made this Christmas card for us. My favorite part of the picture are the stockings hung with care! Those are REAL socks and not some nostalgic reproduction of something like we use today. Back then all they got Christmas morning was an apple or orange in their socks and maybe a peppermint! Oh, how I wish we could go back to a humbler expression of the true Christmas spirit!

One generation shall praise thy works to another and shall declare thy mighty acts.

-Psalm 145:4

-Penny Cannon

Prayer: Lord God, help us keep things simple and heartfelt this season. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Friday, December 16th

People worship differently and are moved or inspired in different ways. Admittedly, I am probably the person on staff who most appreciates casualness as opposed to formalities, but that doesn't make me right or wrong. It's just what speaks to me personally for whatever reasons. God doesn't want us all to be the same. He loves our creative differences.

Needless to say, the children's nativity service is a favorite for me and many others. Why do I love it?

Is it because the children are so stinking cute in their ill-fitting and wonky costumes. I do love that part.

Could it be because they retell the Christmas story in one beautiful and fluid story? Yep, I love that part, too.

Perhaps it's because it makes me laugh when the sheep falls asleep or the shepherd throws his shoe across the chancel or the angel waves at her family . . . yep, those are priceless memories (real ones!)

Or what about how the music and candles and so many young, old, and in between come together in joy, anticipation, and wonder? Indeed yes, I love that, as well!

But what amazes me each year is that these children who I know and love and have watched gallivant and play and tussle and skip and hop and wiggle all year long suddenly turn into very focused little children who have listened well to their instructions and take their roles leading worship and presenting Jesus' story very seriously. (I better knock on wood right this minute!)

Do we, as adults, take Christmas as seriously? What would that mean for us?

- Elise Collins

Prayer: Lord God, make us mindful of the real reason for this season. Help us to take it very seriously. In Jesus' name, Amen.





Saturday, December 17th

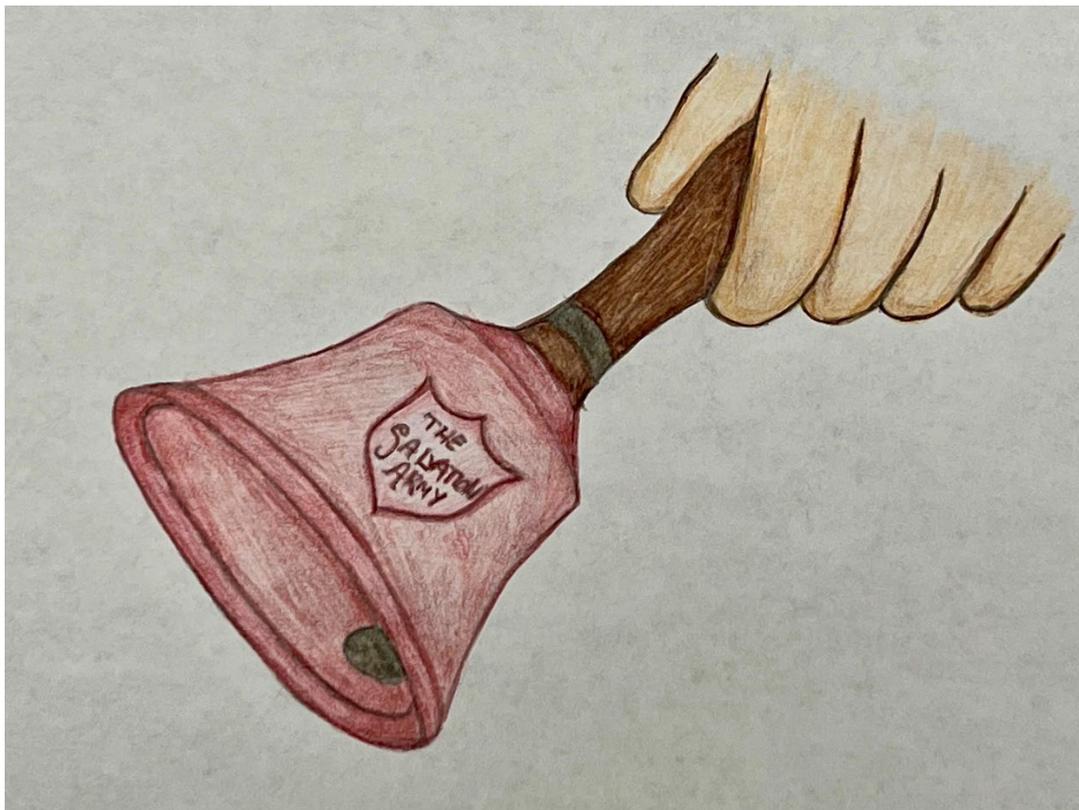
We've all heard Mark 12:31's command to love your neighbor as yourself. I urge you to keep that close to your heart this Christmas season and every season. Be that humble servant that God called you to be. And the best way to do that is to treat everyone as equals.

As stated in Genesis 1:26, we're all created in God's image. No one is inherently better or worse than someone else based on any factor! Gender, race, ethnicity, background; it doesn't matter and that's the beauty of it all! Everyone everywhere is just like you and me and deserves the same love and respect. We are commanded to love each other, no matter what.

If you see someone on the street who needs some help, help them! Buy them a meal and a coat and invite them to come to church. Be that person that they need, but don't do it out of selfish intentions, do it out of love for your neighbor. Ring the Salvation Army bell in the cold, go caroling, and volunteer at the Soup Kitchen! Spread love into the world by loving your neighbor as yourself.

- Michael Gardner

Prayer: Lord God, help us see those in need and listen for your guidance in serving and loving others. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Emma Collins

Sunday, December 18th



Color the candles and flames of all the candles except the middle.

Advent Wreath – PEACE

Miles and miles away in a faraway land, three wise men know something amazing is happening – they can tell by the bright new star in the sky. They are so sure that they have packed up their camels and belongings and are journeying days and nights to follow this wondrous star. Throughout their journey they feel excitement, but also a great sense of peace at the wonder they will soon behold.

We light the purple candles of hope, love, joy, and peace.

Prayer: Lord God, peace is often elusive for us. As we journey closer and closer to you, may your peace be a bright beacon for us. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Sing: The First Nowell

They looked up and saw a star
Shining in the East beyond them far
And to the earth it gave great light
And so it continued both day and
night
Nowell, Nowell, Nowell, Nowell
Born is the King of Israel

And by the light of that same star
3 wise men came from country far
To seek for a King was their intent
And to follow the star wherever it
went
Nowell, Nowell, Nowell, Nowell
Born is the King of Israel

Monday, December 19th

TREASURED ORNAMENTS

It was 1969. I arrived in late October with our 6-week-old-son to join Bill at his military assignment in Seoul, South Korea. It had been quite a journey from Columbia, to Charlotte, to Chicago, refueling in Fairbanks, an overnight stay in Tokyo, and finally touching down in Seoul. Arriving a day late because of a visa snafu, Bill was anxious to see me safely there as well as get his first look at his son.

By December, we were settled in our very tiny apartment. We had adapted to third world living conditions such as boiling our drinking water, adding Clorox drops for extra safety, and heating with charcoal among many other things. Every day was an adventure.

As Christmas approached, we were trying to make Jerry's first Christmas one to remember. We purchased a two-foot, white, artificial tree and placed it on our coffee table. Then we ventured to the outdoor market. There were no shiny baubles, bright lights, or tinsel. Most of the selections were homemade items. At one table we bought paper stars and angels, at another candy canes, and finally two small precious-looking boots. The boots were made of cardboard and wrapped with red and silver foil.

Year after year, when we hang the ornaments on our tree, we each hang a boot near the top and remember our 1969 Christmas. We were in a strange land, away from our loved ones, and at times homesick. The tin foil is beginning to tatter but the resilient cardboard boots have survived many trees, many homes, and many moves. It is by far the least expensive ornament, but it is the most valuable to us.

When you value something, you hold it dear. You treasure it. Our treasure is the birth of Jesus Christ. Embrace the season with peace and love for all and remember to remain sturdy like those paper boots!

- Linda Stevens

Prayer:

Lord God, your extravagant love for us is often reflected in the simplest things. Thank you. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Tuesday, December 20th

Christmas Blessing

As parents, John and I, have always tried to keep Christmas centered around the true meaning. Yes, we participated in the secular activities surrounding the holidays, as well, but we didn't really ever go overboard with gifts. From the time the kids were able to ask for gifts, we told them they could only ask for three things. When they asked why three, we told them because that is what Jesus got from the Wise Men. There were years we had surprises under the tree, but most of the time, they had their three gifts.

In 2016, our holidays were much different from years past, our lives were upside down and everything, including finances, were very complicated. I was not sure how in the world I was going to pull off even the simplest Christmas that year, even just three gifts each. Ali was scheduled to have her second set of braces put on in a few weeks and I had to pay the large deposit for that, as well as take care of all of the household expenses. Things were very, very hard. And then, one Tuesday morning, I arrived at work, opened my office door and found an envelope lying on the floor inside. I picked it up and opened it, not having a clue as to why someone wouldn't have just put it in my box in the front office. In the envelope, was a typed note and a substantial amount of money. The note wasn't signed. There was absolutely no indication of who had slid this envelope under the door. I sank into my office chair, dumbfounded, and in tears. How could I accept this? I had no idea who to thank. Why would someone give me this money? I didn't do anything to earn or deserve it. How in the world would I pay it back? Because there was no name, I could not personally thank the person for the gift. I did have Lea put a blurb in the Spire thanking the mystery Christmas Angel for this amazing blessing. The kids got their three gifts, Ali got her second set of braces and we had a nice meal Christmas day.

As I reflect back on this from time to time, it is not lost on me that this gift is very similar to the gift of Jesus that we received on Christmas Day over two thousand years ago. The gift of Jesus was not something we deserved or earned. We could never repay anyone for his birth and ultimate death for *our* sins. I will likely never know who that Christmas Angel was that blessed my kids and I that Christmas, but I know that they were the very example of Jesus to us that year.

-Beth Bell

Prayer: Lord God, thank you for people who listen to your call to bless others. Help us to listen for our opportunity. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Will Pinson (age 8)

Wednesday, December 21st

Blues, Blahs, & Blessings

Y'all, I love Christmas! I love decorating, making lists, having people over, shopping, listening to Christmas music ad nauseum, eating goodies, and on and on. However, we had three years in a row where Christmas felt "off" because of Pre-Deployment 2019, Covid-yuckiness 2020, and the loss of Bill 2021.

Each year, we thought, "Whew! Glad we got that Christmas melancholy over with. Next year will be so much better and back to normal!" Jinx.

Pre-deployment 2019, Christopher and I went through the motions of Christmas, but our hearts were already dreading the January deployment. There were glimpses of joy and peace, but I'll confess, I also suffered moments where I feared the what-if-this-is-our-last-Christmas-together scenario. Just because these thoughts weren't rational didn't make feel them less.

Christmas 2020, we had high hopes with a hint of PTSD from the feelings from the year before. Little did we know, Covid would strike the household holding on to me for two miserable weeks. We couldn't do a live nativity – I could barely do a greeting from our family as part of the video. I lost 10 pounds and was weak as water. Did I mention our kitchen was gutted? We had Chinese take-out for Christmas and I cried. Now our children think it's tradition . . . I cried harder.

And then Christmas 2021 was just 6 weeks after Bill (my father-in-law) passed away. We celebrated, but in a muted way.

Are you thoroughly depressed yet? Me, too!

But you know what God did? He still shone through in those hard times. Pre-deployment 2019 - We were able to focus more on loving each other really well as we anticipated being separated from Christopher for a period of months. Covid 2020 - Christmas Eve was the first day I desired to eat anything and could keep it down. We watched our beautiful FPC video Christmas Eve service (streamed online for the first time ever) while I took tiny bites of the best sausage biscuit ever made!!! 2021 – We shared memories and laughter remembering Bill and appreciating the presence of those still together.

Life is hard in every season. But look for God. He is working to delight you and let you know he is present with you all the time - through it all.

-Elise Collins

Prayer: Lord God, whatever is causing our blues and blahs, we praise you for our many blessings with which you strive to delight us every day! In Jesus' name, Amen.



Our interpretation of Bill in heaven.

Thursday, December 22nd

THE STOCKINGS WERE HUNG BY THE CHIMNEY WITH CARE

In honor of Alice Jo Dickey

For many years, my most favorite part of Christmas Day was waking up and seeing what was left for me in my stocking. Some items were placed in for me to immediately see what was there, and my favorites were the ones that had been carefully wrapped and pushed to the bottom for an extra added surprise - a family tradition that has always been near and dear to my heart and has lasted for a very long time in our family.

Though in the last few years, they stopped getting “stuffed,” they still hang on my mother’s mantle and with each new family member, the tradition continues. With a new baby being born to our family this year, my mother will not only make a new stocking, but also make room to add it in amongst the ever-growing tradition. And not only are the stockings added, but they are also made exactly like the originals. Many years ago, my mother had someone make our original family of five personalized stockings for Christmas, and though one of those changed names, and several have been added through the years, to me, it represents the tremendous amount of love and closeness that my family offers. It is obvious to see which ones were the originals, and especially which one had a name change, but the definite constant in looking at that beautiful sight every year is the amount of love and care that my mother has for her family. No matter what was going on in our lives, my mother always made Christmas special and made sure that we knew we were loved and cherished by her.

With all the many stockings hanging on that mantle every year at Christmas, there is not one hanging for Jesus. Seems strange that He doesn’t have one with Him being such a huge part of our family, and especially with it being His birthday. Even though there is not a stocking hung by the chimney with care for Him, it is evident that He is there in the celebration. When you look into the eyes of every member of our family and the love that they have for each other, you know that He is a part of it. Even though the stockings aren’t about Jesus and are more a part of Santa’s role, the ones that hang on my mother’s mantle represent so much more to me, than what Santa has to offer. Focusing on remembering that Jesus is the reason for the season becomes more and more a tradition for me, as I grow older, and though the stockings aren’t “stuffed” as they used to be, seeing them hang on that mantle every year is still one of my most treasured Christmas traditions. They represent so much more to me than the gifts that used to be in them. They represent many more treasures that are received on Christmas through the love and care of Jesus Christ.

This Christmas as you look at the stockings hung by your chimney, silently wish Jesus a Happy Birthday and thank Him for being born and remember that He is the reason for the season.

For to us a Child is born, to us a Son is given; and the government shall be upon His shoulder, and His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

- Isaiah 9:6

- Lisa Buchanan

Prayer: Lord God, thank you for those who painstakingly care and nurture us in our homes and out. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Friday, December 23rd

An International Christmas Experience

Roger and I lived in Germany for two years after we were married. That was special in itself, but how we spent that first Christmas was also very special.

We lived in an apartment above a German family. Frau & Herr Doenst, and their two teenage daughters, Helga and Sylvia. We were invited to spend Christmas Eve with them, and were so amazed at their traditions.

The Christmas tree did not go up until Christmas Eve, and it magically appeared while the family attended Christmas Eve service. When they came home, there it was! We were able to be there with them to experience the whole ritual. The truly magical thing to us was that the (live) tree was decorated with real candles which they lit as the evening began. Of course, they were always in the room to keep watch, and they didn't keep them lit for a long while, but there was something magical and special about it. Christkindl brings gifts on Christmas Eve rather than Christmas Day. We enjoyed a traditional meal, exchanged small gifts, and felt so blessed. Here we were in a foreign country spending our first Christmas away from our families, but with a family we had only known for three months and welcomed us with open arms.

God is certainly at work everywhere! While we are all different, we are all the same! After nearly 60 years, I am still in touch with Sylvia, their youngest daughter.



-Barbara Robinette

Prayer: Lord God, light of the world,
shine so brightly that we
reflect your love to others.
In Jesus' name, Amen.

Saturday, December 24th



Color five candles and flames but make the middle candle white

Advent Wreath – CHRIST

A baby in a manger surrounded by a loving mother, a faithful earthly father, amazed shepherds, weary, but worshipful kings from afar, a donkey, lambs and sheep, probably chickens and maybe even an ox. The heavenly chorus looks upon this sight with wonder, awe, anticipation.

Imagine God's smiling face as he too gazed upon this scene – the gift of His Son to His people. A divine light for the world wrapped in the tender human flesh of a baby.

Now imagine knowing the life this precious baby leads ends in suffering on a cross – for you and for me. Our joy becomes tinged with grief and sorrow at what Jesus must suffer.

And yet, God loves us so much, has so much hope for us, is filled with joy for who we are, and offers us peace in who He is.

We light the purple candles of hope, love, joy, peace, and the center Christ candle.

Prayer: Lord God, you love us unconditionally, you never give up hope for us, Your joy for us surprises us, and your peace is like no other. May these gifts from you overflow within us and pour out of us sharing who you are with your people everywhere. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Sing: What Child Is This (145)

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

Why lies he in such mean estate
Where ox and ass are feeding?
Good Christian, fear: for sinners here
The silent Word is pleading.
Nails, spear, shall pierce him through;
the cross be borne for me, for you.
Hail, hail, the Word made flesh, the babe, the son of Mary!

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

Sunday, 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!

And the angels rejoice and sing, "HALLELUJAH!"



Lily Collins