



And Heaven and Nature Sing

First Presbyterian Church
Advent 2025
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And Heaven and Nature Sing

These lyrics from the beloved carol “Joy to the World” remind us that not only do we humans celebrate Jesus, but even nature itself and the heavenly domain celebrate Jesus! Can you imagine us all coming together in praise and worship? What a glorious occasion thought!

Advent is the time leading up to Christmas. It is in many ways the most wonderful time of the year. And in other ways it can be a difficult time. We can find joy in the festive decorations, smiling faces, cheerful gatherings, opportunities to share heartfelt gifts, and delightfully yummy goodies!

But we may also find those exact same things challenging. One thing we can rely on for joy and comfort is Jesus:

- Regardless of the festive decorations, Jesus provides a winter beauty in the stark bark of trees, branches dancing in the sky, pine trees still adorned in green, and skies a bright piercing blue.
- Smiling faces of loved ones and strangers alike remind us that Jesus is near and full of love for us.
- Jesus invites us to gather weekly in worship of him. We can lift up our true feelings, lay our hearts bare before him, and leave a little lighter.
- Heartfelt gifts of listening, loving, forgiving, trying again, and just being still are all God asks.
- Delightfully yummy goodies – treat yourself. Be kind to yourself. Taste and see that God is good.

Friends, make Jesus your priority this season. Look for him in nature, in the faces around you, in communion with others, in yourself, and everywhere. He is just waiting to delight you in big and small ways.

ERC

This devotional was lovingly compiled by Elise Collins and Lea Jones.

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Sunday, November 30
First Sunday in Advent

Leader: Jesus declares, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" - John 8:12.

Leader: From Isaiah 9, we hear: The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shined.

All: We have seen a great light!

Leader: For a child has been born to us, a son given to us; authority rests on his shoulders. He is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Leader: Friends in Christ, what do we wait for?

All: We wait for God, who brings light into darkness and offers hope to all.

Leader: Today, we light the candle of HOPE.

Sing together:

O Come, 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.

Monday, December 1



Years ago I heard a story about placing a small empty manger by a child's bed some time before Christmas in anticipation of Jesus' birth and that precious baby being laid in that manger. On Christmas Eve, after the kiddos were asleep, a baby Jesus would be placed in that manger, waiting for sleepy eyes to discover on Christmas morning. Loving that idea, my husband and I set to work to make that happen for our grandchildren. He designed and made little wooden mangers and I searched the internet for just the right size baby Jesus to fit in those mangers. After collecting hay for the bedding we were all ready and couldn't wait for the opportunity to give the mangers filled with hay to our granddaughters and tell them how exciting it is to wait for Jesus to be born. On Christmas Eve after everyone was asleep, a baby Jesus was placed in each of their mangers. Then on Christmas morning we had the opportunity to show our joy, happiness, and excitement to find that Jesus had been born.

These were simple actions and a fun thing to do, but we never forgot the significance and importance of that baby showing up in those mangers. The best Christmas gift of all! Hopefully we started a tradition that our granddaughters will carry on with their children one day. Teaching all about the true and wonderful meaning of Christmas!

- Lou Noel

Prayer: Lord God, when things seem empty, fill us with hope. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Tuesday, December 2

Symbols of Advent

What are the symbols of Christmas? Here are the symbols we celebrate during the Hanging of the Greens:

Advent is the time of year leading up to Christmas – from four Sundays before Christmas through Christmas Eve. Just like we enjoy the seasons each year, so the church has cyclical seasons reminding us that God was, is, and is yet to be, he is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

The first Sunday in Advent marks the beginning of a new church year. For both Advent and Lent, we use purple paraments to represent royalty. Though Jesus is King, he came from humble origins and lived life like each of us does.

The anticipatory purple of Advent soon leads to the penitent purple of Lent. May we be mindful that God sent the baby of Advent to be the lamb on the cross at Lent and the risen King at Easter.

And one day, he will come again in glory.

Advent Wreath

The tradition of the advent wreath can be traced back to the Middle Ages where it was borrowed from pagan practices offering hope for light in dark seasons.

The circular wreath represents the cycle of time as well as the never-ending circle. This reminds us that God is ever present.

The greenery of evergreens symbolizes life and echoes the message of the timelessness of God.

The four candles represent each of the 4 Sundays leading up to Christmas Day. The candles are purple representing royalty, but also a time of thoughtfulness, retrospection, introspection, and anticipation. The four candles can be different things each week, but our church likes to use descriptions of peace, hope, joy, and love in our progression towards Christmas. The joy candle can also be pink representing Mary's joy.

The candles remind us that Jesus is the light of the world and on Christmas Eve, we light the center Christ candle, which is white to represent Jesus' purity and reminding us that he washes away our sin.

Creche

The creche, also known as a nativity, includes figures from the story of Jesus' birth – Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus, a resting cow, shepherds and their sheep, wise men and their camels, and an angel. Each piece is traditionally carried by a child to be gently placed together on a table in the chancel.

At First Pres, we often move the camels and wise men each week in Advent to represent their long journey. We also keep Jesus in a safe place until Christmas Eve when he is carried down during the Family Nativity Service at 5:30.

Wreathes

Evergreens are a symbol of things that last. They symbolize God's eternal nature. Their circular shape echoes this cyclical representation of life and God – he holds fast to us season in and season out, year after year, and always.

Often holly is used for wreaths. Holly has spiky leaves reminding us of Christ's passion including the crown of thorns, the nails, and the spear. The deep red of the berries and in the ribbon on the wreaths represents Jesus' blood willingly shed for us on the cross.

Poinsettias

There is a Mexican legend about poinsettias that tells of a girl who wanted to bring a gift to baby Jesus. She had nothing to give and so an angel whispered to her to gather weeds along the side of the road. These weeds became beautiful poinsettias in her hands and represent the story of the baby: star shaped leaves remind us of the star of Bethlehem, the vibrant color red reminding us of Jesus suffering on the cross – his blood for our salvation, and white to remind us of Christ's purity – a true unblemished lamb of God.

Chrismon Trees

Chrismon trees combine lights, evergreen trees, and a variety of symbolic ornaments in white and gold. The light shines against the dark green reminding us that Jesus is the light of the world. The evergreen branches symbolize God's constant presence; he never leaves us. The white of the ornaments represents the purity and innocence of Christ while the gold accents represent his kingship. You will see an assortment of ornament symbols including but not limited to:

- ❖ Butterflies for new life
- ❖ Lambs for sacrifice/atonement

- ❖ Stars for illuminating the way
- ❖ Crosses of different styles for Jesus' willing sacrifice for us
- ❖ Fleur-de-lis and triangular symbols representing the 3-part trinity
- ❖ Dove for the Holy Spirit and for peace
- ❖ Crown for our heavenly King
- ❖ Chalice for communion

Prayer: Lord God, may we see you everywhere this season. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

- Elise Collins



Bryson Willard and Hudson Lloyd carrying creche pieces for the Hanging of the Greens in 2018.

Wednesday, December 3

“Don’t be afraid!” he said. “I bring you the most joyful news ever announced, and it is for everyone! The Savior- yes, the Messiah, the Lord- has been born tonight in Bethlehem. How will you recognize him? You will find a baby wrapped in a blanket, lying in a manger!”

- Luke 2:10-1

Currently we have what looks like the Nativity in our backyard. It is a simple goat shed Preston and I built, but it looks so much like the stable from the nativity. That is what I think of when I see it and it makes me smile. What is so strange to think about is that this shed is for goats- animals that make a mess and smell! This is the kind of place that God planned and chose for our Lord to come to this world in. This is so humble and wild to think about. God truly gets on our level and reaches out to us in a way that is easier for us to understand and relate to. That tells so much about our God, that he will do whatever it takes to get to know us and portray Himself to us in a way that we can understand. God called the poor, shepherds, and the rich, the wisemen, to visit Jesus. We are all invited and wanted- to come know Jesus and meet Him.

- Dale Culbertson

Prayer: Lord God, thank you for meeting us exactly where we are and how we are.
May we grown in relationship with you. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.



Thursday, December 4

Even in the coldest seasons, God is preparing the next harvest

“The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.” — Isaiah 40:8

I was born and reared in Lake Wales, Florida, at the heart of the Florida citrus industry. In December 1989, I was at home for the holiday and on Christmas Day, we awakened to a cold and still dawn: an unexpected freeze swept across the State with temperatures that remained below freezing for over twenty-six hours. Citrus trees—green and fruitful just days before, symbols of life and abundance—were covered with frost. Most groves in the area were now dead and lost.

Yet, with time and faith, new life emerged. Groves were replanted, growers waited, life and hope were restored.

That Christmas long ago reminds us of another cold night, long before—when the world itself seemed barren and waiting. Into that darkness, in a humble manger, God sent His Son. The warmth of His presence began to thaw a world frozen by sin and fear. Advent teaches us to believe that God still brings life to what seems lifeless, and light to the coldest places in our hearts. When we face our own “freezes”—moments when faith feels brittle or dreams seem gone—may we remember that God’s promises are not undone by any earthly season.

- Tom Nelson

Prayer: Lord God, sometimes we feel hardened and cold. Forgive us and help us be warmed by you and your people so that we may engage others for your glory. In Jesus’ name we pray,
Amen.



Winter tree by
Mills Anderson

Friday, December 5

The Light That Still Shines

Every December, as lights sparkle across our streets and churches, I'm reminded that Christmas is not just a season, it's a story of light breaking through darkness. Over two thousand years ago, in the quiet town of Bethlehem, God chose the humblest setting to send His greatest gift - His Son, Jesus Christ.

In a world still filled with hardship, fear, and uncertainty, the message of Christmas continues to whisper hope: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." (John 1:5)

When we gather with our families, sing carols, or share a meal with those in need, we carry that same light. Every small act of kindness reflects Emmanuel God with us.

One of my favorite Christmas carols from Pakistan is "Yesu Tu Aaya Duniya Mein" ("Jesus, You Came Into the World"). I love this song because it captures the deep gratitude and wonder of the Christmas story in our own language and culture. The gentle rhythm and heartfelt Urdu lyrics make me feel the nearness of Jesus — not just as the Savior of the world, but as our Savior, who understands the hopes and struggles of our people. When I hear this carol sung in a church, surrounded by voices praising in harmony, I am reminded that Christ's love is alive here in our homes, in our hearts, and in Pakistan.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank You for coming into our world into our brokenness and our joy. Help us to share Your light through our words, our worship, and our actions this Christmas. May Your peace fill our hearts and our land. Amen.

- Samar Din



Saturday, December 6

Pearl Harbor Day

Pearl Harbor was surprised by a Japanese air attack in 1941. It was a horrendous day. And yet, here we are 84 years later tomorrow, remembering what happened and honoring the fallen. Bad things happen, but God can make good come from even the very worst.

The babe in the manger came to live life like a human. He came to feel feelings like a human. He experienced bad things in his time here – hunger and thirst in the wilderness, questioning by John, betrayal by Judas, denial by Peter, disbelief and murderous hearts by religious authorities, frustration when he didn't come in time to save Lazarus, pain and suffering at the hands of the Romans, abandonment by most of his inner circle in his darkest hour. But Jesus never gave up hope. How could he when he is hope itself.

Life is full of hardships and trials. But hope is constant. Let this Christmas fill you with surprising hope. See the lights and let them remind you that Jesus is the light of the world – shining for me and for you. Taste the baked yumminess and know that Jesus is the bread of life providing just what we need, just when we need it. Listen to Christmas music and let it resonate within you buoying your spirits and filling you with a sense of wonder. Put your favorite carols on repeat! Smell the pine tree or scented candles and let them carry you to childhood memories of loved ones. Touch those near and dear to you with hugs or a pat on the back or on top of the head. Hold them close and thank God for his love flowing through so many in our lives.

And if you still feel lonely or empty, come by the church, we have smiles and hugs in abundance just waiting for you!

Friends, let's be hope for each other. Let us shine his light such that it draws the lonely, the broken, and the numb straight to us for God's glory.

- Elise Collins

Prayer: Lord God, make us observant and mindful of others who need you. Help us reach out offering hope to your people as you call us. In Jesus' name, Amen.





December 7
Second Sunday in Advent

Leader: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men!" – Luke 2:14

Leader: Isaiah 11: 6-9 says: The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat,

All: the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.

Leader: Friends in Christ, what do we wait for?

All: We wait for the Lord, who offers us peace, His peace unlike any other. Our hearts need not be troubled no matter the trouble we're in.

Leader: Today, we light the candle of peace.

Sing: 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.

Monday, December 8

What are we waiting for? Waiting for Christmas, for remembering the story of a tiny baby and a celebratory birth with characters like sheep and shepherds, wise men and a star, angels and a donkey, now that is exciting!

But Advent is more than that. Advent is waiting for something very different and unknown. Advent is about waiting for Christ to come again. We don't know what that will look like or when it will be. We're supposed to be excited, but with so many unknowns it can also be a little intimidating.

When Jesus came the first time, no one saw it coming in the way in which it happened. So, when Jesus comes again, we can anticipate the same. We can't know what to expect. But we do know that God is good and that he loves us so much that he wants better for us than we want for ourselves. How can we not trust that? How can we not celebrate the unknown when it's in the mightiest and the gentlest hands in the universe?

Because we're human. We struggle to trust. We want understanding – to know what's coming. We don't want growing pains. We want assurances. We want comfort and easy blessings.

But our good God knows that without the hardships, pains, struggles, and trials, we won't really know who God really is and how to completely and entirely submit and lean on him.

With the struggles of labor comes the joy of birth.

With the anguish of running comes the winning of the race.

With the burdens of work come the reaping of rewards.

With the letting go of difficult relationships comes the opportunity for healthy relationships.

With the submission of your will comes the blessing of God's will.

Come, Lord Jesus, come. Not just as a tiny baby to suffer among your people. Come in all your glory to restore this creation and make us whole. Make us excited about that! Not afraid.

Come, Lord Jesus, come.

Prayer: Lord God, we wait for you. Fill us with excitement for the opportunity for your judgement. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

- Elise Collins



Advent Wreath by Will Pinson

Tuesday, December 9

It was Christmas, I was in the hospital for open heart surgery after my accident. I was all alone fighting depression and in severe pain.

All of a sudden there was a gentleman in my doorway with an angel in his hands. He says "Hi! I'm so happy to see you're awake. I've visited you frequently while I visited my wife. But you have been in and out of consciousness. I have something for you. It's a guardian angel for you. I hope it will continue to keep you safe and watch over you."

Tears came to my eyes thinking of the kindness of this complete stranger who had been checking on me and I didn't know. God works in powerful ways. Especially during the Christmas season. I still have that guardian angel to this day.

- Michelle Barksdale

Prayer: Lord God, thank you for the people you use to share your love and peace. Help us to obey when you call us to be that angel. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.



Wednesday, December 10

When I was young, like all children, I was always excited about Christmas. I loved decorating the tree, putting up the stockings, making cookies and singing Christmas Carols. Of course, I tried to be as good as I could be because Santa was watching me! As the tree went up, I got more and more excited in anticipation of the big day.

Christmas Eve finally arrived. As was our family tradition, we went to church for the Christmas Pageant. One year I got to be an angel in the pageant. That was just the best! But this year as I sat there, once again I became caught up in the story of the first Christmas. I had memorized Luke 2:8-16 when I was 4 years old so I could recite it for my grandmother who was in the hospital. So, the story was very familiar

After the pageant, we headed home. While riding I looked out of the window and saw a very bright star. I thought that must be the same star the Wise Men followed. I watched it all the way home. There have been scientific explanations to explain the star...Venus and Jupiter aligned for instance. But for me it was a sign of Jesus' birth both on the first Christmas and while I was looking out of the car window. I watched it all the way home.

My bedroom window looked out over the roof and chimney. I stared out over the roof hoping to catch Santa in the act. Instead, I saw the star again. Once again, I recalled the Bible verses I had memorized and told myself I should remember the real reason for Christmas. I went to sleep thinking about that.

I still get excited about Christmas for many of the same reasons I did when I was young. However, I still look for that star which signals the love of God who gave us the real reason for Christmas. It's there every time just like He is.

- Betsy Collins

Prayer: Lord God, thank you for reminders of your wonder and love.
In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.




Star by
Braxton McCurry


Fruit of the Spirit

By: Baxter P. & Lyle C.
ages 11 & 10


Kiwi:

 kiwi is furry on the outside but juicy on the outside.
don't judge a book by its' cover.
KINDNESS


Blueberry:

 Blueberry's advice is: you can sometimes be blue, but soak up the sun and live a juicy life when you aren't.
SELF CONTROL

Strawberry:

 When you take the stem off a strawberry it looks like a heart.
LOVE

Grape:

 it doesn't matter what people look like, it matters what their actions say. A grape can be green or purple, but both can be delicious.
GOODNESS

Dragon Fruit:



Names don't matter as much as the stuff on the inside. Dragon fruit is a hard name, but Dragon Fruit is actually soft.

GENTLENESS



Watermelon:

Watermelon can seem happy. Soft, hard, seedy whatever you are, you can be joyful.

JOY



Pine apple:

Pine apples are a sign of welcome. Welcoming someone is a way of showing Peace.

PEACE



APPLE:

An apple has faith in its tree to go from green to red.

FAITH



Orange:

The orange and you both have to have patience so you can peel the orange.

PATIENCE

- Baxter Penney (11) and Lyle Clark (10)

Prayer: Lord God, thank you for the fruits of the Spirit! In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Friday, December 12

Mary, Did You Know? by Mark Lowry is one of my most favorite Christmas songs. It hits my mama heart making me empathize with Mary, the mother of Jesus. She's holding her baby boy with all the typical mom hopes and dreams, but even more than that, the hopes and dreams of God's people! He'll have authority over nature and humans, he'll seek out the undesirables and the unlikely characters to follow him and do great works. He'll turn what "righteousness" looks like on it's head! She had no idea what was coming. But in his face, she saw love and hope . . .

Mary, did you know that your baby boy would one day walk on water?
Mary, did you know that your baby boy will save our sons and daughters?
Did you know that your baby boy has come to make you new?
This child that you've delivered will soon deliver you.

Mary, did you know that your baby boy will give sight to a blind man?
Mary, did you know that your baby boy will calm a storm with His hand?
Did you know that your baby boy has walked where angels trod?
And when you kiss your little baby you've kissed the face of God

Mary, did you know?

The blind will see!
The deaf will hear!
And the dead will live again!
The lame will leap!
The dumb will speak
The praises of the Lamb!

Prayer: Lord God, may we see love and hope in the faces of your people. In Jesus' name, Amen.

- Elise Collins



2021 Nativity

Saturday, December 13

One Christmas in the 1980s my stocking had an orange in it. Seriously. I was underwhelmed. Sure, there were other things in there, but I thought the orange was just a waste of space!

Looking back I realize it was a tight Christmas for my parents.

How often do we dwell on what ifs and wishes?

How often do we really think about the many blessings in our lives.

I didn't get a new car when I turned 16 even though I thought I should. But God blessed me with amazing parents who love me well and provided a beautiful childhood for me. And they even let me drive their Toyota van to school sometimes much to my embarrassment.

I didn't have parachute pants or jelly shoes when they were in style, but I had good food every day and a safe place to sleep every night. And I actually did get a Members Only jacket!

I missed the United States when we lived in the Caribbean, but my mom did her best to have a fun Halloween festivity for just the 5 of us at home.

We didn't have tv in the Caribbean, but my parents bought me book after book and that's where my love of reading began.

Moving every few years has the drawback of not always having a group of friends, but my parents made sure that my brothers and I had each other and enjoyed time together (most of the time).

Having two pastors as parents meant never being able to skip church! Even now it feels strange if I'm not in church on a Sunday. It's where I want to be. It's where my people are. It's fulfilling and joyful and home. And as much as I want to be there for others, I also need each of you to be there for me.

I am rich beyond compare. And so are you.

Prayer: Lord God, thank you for the riches we often take for granted. In Jesus' name we pray,
Amen.



-Elise Collins



December 14
Third Sunday in Advent

Leader: And Mary said: “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. – Luke 1:46-49

Leader: Isaiah 35 tells us: The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.

All: Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.

Leader: They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads.

All: Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

Leader: Friends in Christ, what do we wait for?

All: We are waiting for the Lord, who turns mourning into dancing and who tells us to rejoice always.

Leader: Today, we light the candle of JOY!

Sing: O come, thou Key of David, come, and open wide our heavenly home;
make safe the way that leads on high, and close the path that leads to misery.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

Monday, December 15

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given;
and the government will be on His shoulder.
And his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor,
Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
- Isaiah 9:6

Christmas always brings to my mind shiny lights, colorful presents & decorations, visits with family and holiday parties. It's a time of joy and reflection on another year gone by.

As I get older and family is spread far and wide, I find myself reflecting more on the real meaning of Christmas. It's the promise fulfilled of our God to send us a baby, a King, a Savior from our sins. It's the reminder that God kept his Word to us for salvation & atonement and reconciliation with Him by bridging our separation from him caused by our sins.

It's a new beginning, a new covenant or rebirth for believers, providing us with what we need for a righteous life.

It's God's power & purpose ----born in humble circumstances, teaching us that our value isn't determined by material wealth.

A baby was born that we might live! Rejoice! As our decorations sparkle in our homes and church, remember God's light & gift to us of eternal life through that baby ----Christ Jesus!

-Carol Umphress

Prayer: Lord God, fill us with wonder each and every day! In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.



Zakaiyah Dobbs-Arthur

Tuesday, December 16

All is Calm

One Christmas morning, I received a toy that I loved. I was a big fan of Snoopy and the Peanuts gang. The toy was a Snoopy WW I Flying Ace with a plane and a catapult. When you loaded up the plane and hit a button, Snoopy would fly off. As I thought about that toy, the song by the Royal Guardsmen called “Christmas Bells” kept on running through my head. It is a continuation of the ongoing duel between Snoopy and the Red Baron. This song takes place during Christmas time. The Red Baron gets the best of the WW I Flying Ace, but instead of shooting him down, forces Snoopy down behind enemy lines. To the listener’s surprise, a Christmas toast is offered instead of the alternative. This song is inspired by the Christmas truce during WW I between the British and German soldiers. During a brief moment, soldiers from both sides put down their weapons and exchanged gifts, danced and sang songs together, sharing the peace of Christmas.

A few years ago, our family had the opportunity to see a show performed by a men’s acapella group, Cantus, called *All is Calm*. It is a show based on this truce that uses letters, diary entries, and songs from both sides of the conflict. The show gives us a glimpse of the miracle that happened on that evening. The show is brought together with a version of Silent Night being sung in German and English, ending with the phrase “All is Calm.” Through this story of the Christmas truce, we see what each of the candles of Advent represent – Hope, Joy, Love, and Peace, with Christ being in the center of it all.

God’s miracles are often unexpected. From the miracle of a virgin birth in a stable to a brief peace in the midst of war, God gives us a glimpse of what his promise of peace can be. His miracles happen all around us and if we trust in him and allow ourselves to be filled with his presence, we may be fortunate enough to recognize them and use them to bring about his message. After all, look what a little toy was able to do for me to remember that God’s peace can be found anywhere.

- Christopher Collins

Prayer: Lord God, give us peace that astonishes and connects. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.



Wednesday, December 17

The Greatest Gift

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whosoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life.

- John 3:16

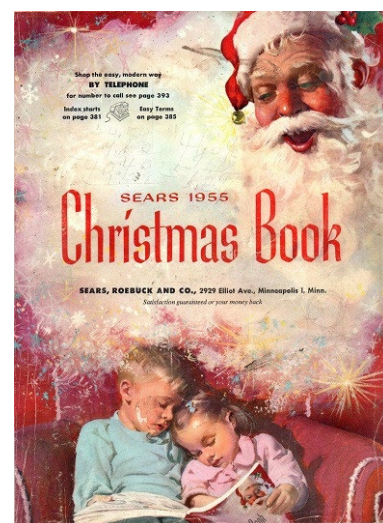
The greatest gift ever given was not from the Sears Roebuck Christmas catalog as I thought when I was a child. In the 1950's a Sears catalog was sent to many homes in America along about October to be perused for gifts for the upcoming season. I spent a good bit of time poring over the pages trying to decide what I wanted Santa to bring. Invariably, I chose a doll, and when Christmas morning arrived, I thought I had received the greatest gift in the world!

Over the years, I have received many gifts, some very special and some destined for the Good Will donation box. Also, I've spent much time shopping for gifts, not to mention wrapping and decorating them. I have enjoyed exchanging gifts with my family and friends, but sometimes I've asked myself if maybe I could have spent my time in more meaningful ways: visiting the lonely and sick, volunteering for worthy causes, spending more time in God's Word, to name just a few.

After other family input, my sister and I, who coordinate our holiday get-togethers, have decided to change our traditional family gift-giving this year. I hope I don't sound like a "Grinchette" but I am glad. Some of us will send donations to charities in honor of our family members, and others will make their own decisions. (I realize that many families have been doing this for a long time.) We'll get together, have a wonderful meal, and enjoy catching up with each other. We'll read the "Christmas Story" as we've done every Christmas I can remember. We will rejoice in the story of the greatest gift ever given: God's gift of His only Son Jesus Christ to the entire world, a gift without an expiration date and one that we can share with others throughout our time on earth!

- Nancy Wilson

Prayer: Lord God, instill in our hearts how you would have us show your love to others. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.



Thursday, December 18

The Tamarisk Tree Cultivating a child to foster a robust faith

“Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it.” - Proverbs 22:6

“And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children.” – Deuteronomy 6: 6-7

“Bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.” – Ephesians 6:4

In our Bema disciple class I learned about the Tamarisk Tree which is grown in the desert. Sometimes called a salt cedar, it requires a little bit of cultivation. It doesn't come up on its own and must be planted. It takes in moisture from the air and uses this moisture, redistributing it in its shade. Amazingly it takes at least 80 years to grow to complete full maturity. One plants a Tamarisk for others, not for one's own enjoyment.

It's like cultivating your child or in my case, my grandchild, to foster a robust Christian faith. And just like planting the Tamarisk Tree, I may not get to witness Akers' growth in trusting God and loving Jesus but hopefully he'll look back and remember a Bible story taught on Wednesday night or how our church family gives to those less fortunate.

I find the best way to help build your child's faith is leading by example. Let them see you reading the Bible, read to them, praying, sometimes asking for strength during difficult times, asking for forgiveness and always remembering to be thankful for your many blessings.

Prayer: Dear God, help my faith to trust that the seeds that I and other church mentors' plant will bear fruit in time. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

- Rebecca Wise



The Tamarisk Tree and Akers, my grandson!



Friday, December 19

Only a few days left until the big day! Christmas Eve with all it's expectations and plans and last-minute errands is 5 days away. The hustle and bustle can be invigorating or discouraging! But, at last, the time is gone and we can finally rest and celebrate.

Before Christmas we are all out Marthas! Well done! And thank you!

During Christmas, let's be devoted Marys. Let's stop where we are – it will be enough. Let's sit back and look at our loved ones' faces as they talk or play or eat. Let's be fully engaged in the now with our people. No distractions – silence that phone! Laugh, play, and soak up the memories as they are happening.

Is your house quiet? Have the bustling years come and gone? Treat yourself. What do you love to do? Do it! No guilt! Get on the phone and CALL (that's where you push buttons and you are magically connected to someone using words!) Facetime, even and get a good look at that person you love. Go visit someone! A quick doorway "Merry Christmas" and a hug can mean so much to folks who are on their own.

Is there someone you wish things were better with? Call them, "Hey! I miss you. I'm sorry we've had a hard time. Just know that I love you no matter what! Yes, even when it seems like I don't like you."

Get out the photo albums. Play the Christmas favorites. Praise God in all you do and with all you are.

Prayer: Lord God, prepare me to rest on Christmas day so I can praise you!
In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

ERC



Angel by
Ellie LaForge

Saturday, December 20

*In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are **highly favored!** The Lord is with you."*

- Luke 1:26-28

I was recently reading through some of my Granddaddy's sermons and came across one about Mary being called "highly favored." That's how the angel describes Mary. What a wonderful way to be known! God has seen you and your goodness and He has chosen you to be the mother of His son. Whoa. Not only that but your son will be "great" and "will be given the throne of his father David" and "his kingdom will never end." Imagine how Mary must have pictured all of that happening in the future. What excitement! What dreams! And yet . . .

I wonder if she felt highly favored when Joseph thought to divorce her quietly?

I wonder if she felt highly favored when she had to ride a donkey for miles and miles away from home while on the verge of labor?

I wonder if she felt highly favored when there was no room in any inn and she had to give birth in a stable among the animals?

I wonder if she felt highly favored when stinky, lowly shepherds showed up to see her baby.

I wonder if she felt highly favored when they took Jesus to the Temple and they encountered Simeon who had been waiting for years to meet the Messiah and he warned Mary that a "sword will pierce her soul."

I wonder if she felt highly favored when Wise Men showed up to see her baby and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh before warning them to flee to Egypt before Herod had all the baby boys slaughtered.

I wonder if she felt highly favored when she came to visit adult Jesus and he said, "Who are my mother and my brothers?"

I wonder if she felt highly favored when the people of Nazareth tried to stone one of their own – her son!

I wonder if she felt highly favored when Judas betrayed her son, Simon denied him, Pilate had him beaten, and the crowd turned on him calling for his crucifixion just days after Palm Sunday's celebration.

I wonder if she felt highly favored when she watched her son tormented to death on the cross.

Mary had no idea what to expect, and much of her experience is challenging, difficult to understand, and heartbreaking. It doesn't feel "highly favored."

And yet, she bore the son of God and loved him and brought him up and followed him. And we know that no matter what comes our way, God is with us. We, too, are highly favored. He knows what we feel. He knows what we want and he knows what he wants for us.

Mary set such an example for us. Joy in the journey. Hope for each step, each moment. Never give up. We're never alone. After all, at the crucifixion, Jesus tells his mother: *"Woman, behold, your son!"* Then he said to the disciple John, *"Behold, your mother!"* And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home (John 19:26b-27).

Sometimes, we face difficult things in this life. The journey, as hard as it may be, is a gift, an opportunity. Will we feel "highly favored?" Do we believe God is working all things for good? **All things for good?** Will we respond with the grace and persistence of Mary?

Prayer: Lord God, you want what is best for your children. As we walk through all the highs and lows of life, may we see ourselves as "highly favored." In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

- Elise Collins





December 21
Fourth Sunday in Advent

Leader: An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” – Matthew 1: 18-21

Leader: John 3:16 reminds us: For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son,

All: that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Leader: Friends in Christ, who do we wait for?

All: We wait for the Lord, who wants us to love him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Leader: Today we light the candle of LOVE.

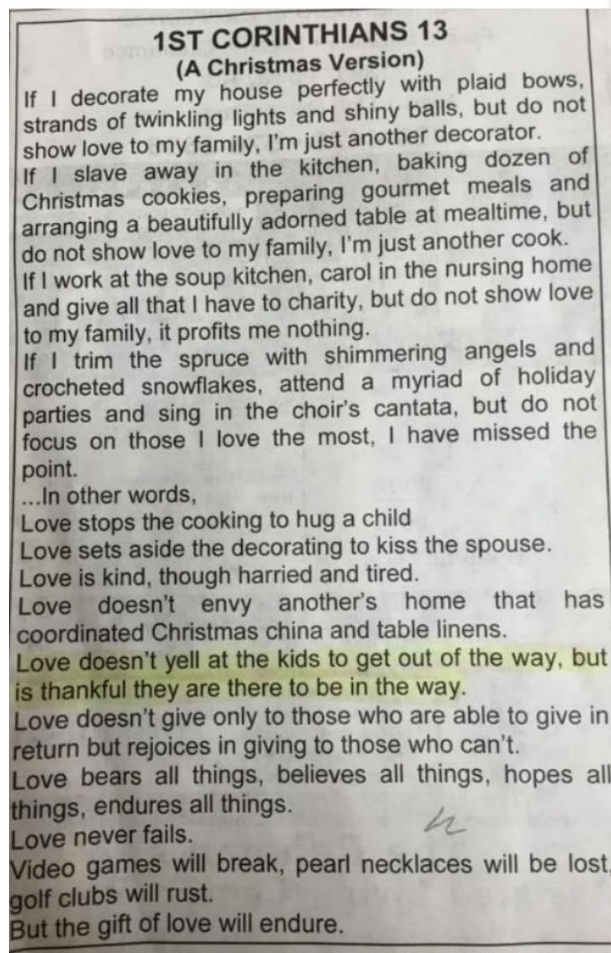
Sing: O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lowly exile here until the Son of God appear. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel will come to thee, O Israel.

Monday, December 22

"Love"

"Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
Love never ends. . ."

My guess is that these words from Paul's letter to the Corinthians are quite familiar to you. You've probably heard the passage from 1 Corinthians 13 read at numerous weddings and during worship times but maybe not in the context of the Christmas season. I read the newspaper clipping below last Christmas in a FaceBook post. . . I don't know the source but it appears to be from an advice column (the highlighted line was already marked). This Christmas version of Paul's passage definitely gives me reason to pause and reflect on the times I am challenged to prioritize better and to love more fully. With God's help, may the gift of love endure during EVERY part of our Christmas Season.



- Donna Thompson

Prayer: Lord God, echo these thoughts in hearts all year long! In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Tuesday, December 23

“With the jelly roast proclaim
Christ is born in Bethlehem.”

Yep, those are the lyrics my 5-year-old brother sang as part of the children’s nativity at Few’s Chapel UMC back in 1980-ish. But, oh man, he sang it with gusto. He was all in! No one missed his version because he was on the front row as a wise man with his crown slipping down over his forehead. He kept wiggling his eyebrows and jutting out his jaw in an effort to try to get the crown back up, but to no avail.

And then we had the Christmas of the Charlie Brown tree – a branch from a tree in the Caribbean. It was pretty puny, but we didn’t mind. We lit it and decorated it and put presents under it.

And then there was the Christmas that my mom’s dad was so excited to cook the turkey in the microwave. Yes, you read that correctly. And, yes, your thoughts are spot on – it did not go well. Hours later we ate a turkey-less dinner. None of us cared that much but it was a little sad to see my Pappy so deflated from being shamed by his wife, my Mam-maw.

One of my favorites was the year a sheep threw his shoe across the chancel during the children’s nativity here at First Pres when I was dating Christopher.

And we can’t forget the Covid Christmas of 2020. 4 of the 5 of us tested positive for Covid leading up to Christmas. Thank goodness I had pretty much gotten everything together by then because absolutely nothing else happened after Covid struck. This became the year that China Garden became a Christmas Day tradition.

Christmas doesn’t have to be perfect. We may sing the wrong lyrics or have wardrobe malfunctions. Perhaps our decorations aren’t quite glamorous. Sometimes food doesn’t turn out like we hope. And certainly, we can’t anticipate every little detail of what will actually happen on any given day.

But we can take what comes our way in stride. We can choose to laugh instead of cry. We can use our imaginations a little more. We can choose joy over anger, encouragement over shame. And we can roll with whatever punches come our way making the most of things with the people we love. That’s what Christmas and every day should be about. I think Jesus would approve.

Prayer: Lord God, help us see beauty and find joy in all circumstances. In Jesus’ name we pray,
Amen.

- Elise Collins





Wednesday, December 24
Christmas Eve

Leader: “Don’t be afraid,” the angel said to them.

All: “Look: I’ve got good news for you, news which will make everybody very happy.

Leader: Today a savior has been born for you—the Messiah, the Lord!—in David’s town.

All: This will be the sign for you: you’ll find the baby wrapped up, and lying in a feeding-trough.”

Leader: Friends in Christ, what do we wait for?

All: We wait for the Lord, born as a babe in a manger, killed on a cross, resurrected from the grave, giver of the Spirit within us, Light of the World, and keeper of our heavenly home.

Leader: Today we light the Christ candle!

Sing: Joy to the World



Thursday, December 25
Christmas Day

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to their own town to register.

⁴ 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. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ 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.

⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."



Caroline Griffith, Ellie LaForge, Beau Pinson, Reagan Anderson
Tinsley Culbertson, Susie Culbertson, Kate LaForge, Jacob Rendall

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

¹⁵ 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."

¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ 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 21-20