



2021 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

Storybook Christmas





Storybook Christmas

Advent Journal ~ November 28



"I despise your festivals" says the prophet Amos. Oh Amos, I can relate. Long before Advent even begins, we must deal with the pageantry and marketing of Christmas. It seems to be a perpetual joke that businesses keep pushing the start of Christmas earlier and earlier in the year. Eventually, we may get to the point where we are unsure in May if the Christmas decorations on a store end cap are left over from the year before or the beginning of the new season.

Amos was tired of it, this superficial celebration from the unfaithful. Such anger and counter-cultural angst reminds me of Frank Costanza, a character in the 90s sitcom, *Seinfeld*, who grew tired of the consumerism of Christmas and replaced it with a "Festivus for the rest of us." Out with the Christmas tree and in with a steel pole without any adornment. Out with Christmas cards and feasts, and in with "airing of grievances," and "the feats of strength." Now I am not saying to get rid of all the pageantry or celebratory decorations. I'm not saying get rid of the gifts or the cards or the music. But perhaps for this year, let us not let these things steal our attention from God and from our neighbors. Perhaps this year, we will let justice and righteousness be the marks of the season. Let us adorn our lives with mercy and love, and worry less about the decorations.

Lord, give us eyes and hearts to see opportunities for justice, and to act upon them. Amen.

Louden Young



Storybook Christmas

Advent Journal ~ November 29



"We must put Christ back in Christmas!"

The cry will echo through many a gathering of Christians this Christmas season. "Why, oh why, must this most holy of days be so exploited and poisoned by commercial interests?"

With a little help from the Apostle Paul I'd like to present another perspective. In the second chapter of Philippians, Paul speaks of the day when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Paul is not saying that everyone shall confess the Lordship of Christ in true faith. He is saying that God's power is so great and God's love so overflowing the entire population of the world will be forced—even against its will—to pause and take note of, even bow down and adore the infant Jesus.

Is there any other day in all of western civilization when this happens more universally than at Christmas? And not in spite of, but because of commercialism.

Last December I sat in the packed concert hall of the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. for the annual "The Twelve Days of Christmas" festivities. I experienced the meaning of Paul's words in a new way as I joined thousands of others singing:

Hark! The herald angels sing,
Glory to the newborn King;
Peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled.

Joyful all ye nations rise,
Join the triumph of the skies;
With the angelic host proclaim:
'Christ is born in Bethlehem.'

Hark! The herald angels sing,
Glory to the newborn King.

I doubt that many singing those words were disciples of Christ. Many may not have really gotten beyond mere sentimentality to the real meaning of Christmas. And yet the birth of Christ was recognized and acknowledged.

Christmas today may be exploited, deformed, even perverted by some with the skillful twisting of carols into advertising jingles and the frenzied activity of the



merchant and consumer alike. But in the midst of this caricature of Christmas is a recognition that Jesus has come and a time for rejoicing is in order. Neither the store clerk nor the chairman of the board of the largest corporation can ignore the fact of Christmas. It is forced upon them. For every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess the birth of Jesus.

As someone has suggested, "It is at Christmas the world, the renegade fallen world—despite itself—must pause and sing a Christmas carol, calling that night a holy night, when the hopes and fears of all the years are met in Bethlehem.

Perhaps our quarrel at Christmas should not be with commercialism, for through it the world is forced to worship the Christ and every tongue confesses that Jesus has come.

Bernie Bowman

(Originally written December 30, 1997)



Storybook Christmas

Advent Journal ~ November 30



Cultural Reflections on Advent

Advent is a season of preparation for the coming of Christ. In Jamaica where Del and I grew up, preparation for the Christmas season is evident everywhere. In fact, the Christmas season in Jamaica is the most festive time of year, filled with nonstop religious and cultural celebrations: entertainment, festivals, feasting, and happy gatherings of friends and family. Jamaica is in the tropics, so there is no snow and although the high temperature at this time of year is generally a balmy 80-85 degrees Fahrenheit, the season presents a unique crispness in the air that Jamaicans recognize as the Christmas Breeze. Local governments generally provide Christmas work for the less resourced, which include cleaning roadside drains, trimming overhanging bushes, and “sprucing up” the public roadways. These jobs provide needed Christmas money. Jamaicans make sure their residential properties are festively adorned, no matter the size or value, a shack or mansion. Homestead border walls, fences and the lower part of tree trunks are whitewashed with a slurry of white lime (limestone), presenting clean, bright white contrasts to the surrounding lush greenery and the fiery red poinsettia hedges to signify that Christmas is on its way.

On Christmas Eve there is the much anticipated “Grand Market,” which is best described as a cross between a festival and a market with food, street dancing, crafts, and music. Every town has one. Vendors display their festive wares for adults and children alike to shop amid the blasting sounds of Christmas music penetrating the airways. As children, we always looked forward to going to the “Grand Market” with our mothers. Apart from getting an opportunity to visit the larger town (which was a rare occurrence), accompanying our mothers to the market usually meant that we would be getting some desired articles of clothing for Christmas! We would use the meagre funds that had been accumulating in our piggy banks (a covered jar or other container) to purchase a toy, a noisemaker, or even firecrackers which we would set alight on Christmas Eve to celebrate the coming special day.

Another anticipated special Advent activity took place at church. We, the children, would excitedly get ready to stage the annual Christmas pageant. I distinctly remember one year being one of the Magi but can't remember if I brought gold, frankincense or myrrh! Del recalls the stiff competition among the girls to be selected for the part of Mary and the disappointment she felt when she was not chosen.

Fast forward to today, years later. Here in Maryville, TN, we, as well as other members of New Providence Presbyterian Church, still prepare for Advent, each of us in our own way. Like us, many have fond memories of childhood



celebrations and wish we could continue in many of those traditions but can't for various reasons and circumstances beyond our control. One thing the current pandemic has taught us is that perhaps we had all along been focusing on the wrong things. Many of us are likely checking online for just that perfect gift, others are braving the malls for that elusive item, while many are seeking ways to make the holidays a bit brighter for the less fortunate. No matter what we do or how we celebrate, it behooves us to remember the true meaning of Christmas: the spiritual reflection on and celebration of the birth of the Christ-child. As Christians, let us in this season of Advent think seriously, as our Lord would have, about our world today and how we can celebrate in ways that reflect Jesus' life and examples.

Oh God, you are our Rock and our fortress in a world shaken by violence and hate. As we prepare for the Advent season, gather us together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. Calm our fears and keep our faith strong.

We have a lot for which we are thankful.

We have our health;

We have shelter;

We have food;

We have loved ones and neighbors on whom to call in times of distress;

We have Your House in which to worship.

We ask that you provide these same comforts to those who are in need. Take the hate from our hearts. Open our eyes and show us how to love. May your presence fill us with a thirst for unity, wholeness, and a desire to see all people as valued.

Mike and Del Smith



Storybook Christmas

Advent Journal ~ December 1



Matthew 2:1-2

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

A few years ago, I went on a holiday home tour which took buses of folks around the north Knoxville area to various homes that had been decorated for Christmas. Some homes were grand, some were simple, some were even in the midst of renovation, but all of them had managed to decorate their spaces with some combination of Christmas trees, sparkly decorations, candles, wreaths, stockings or greenery.

My favorite house from that tour was a craftsman-styled home that obviously belonged to a family with small children. There was a well-organized home-schooling room dedicated to the kids. Small tables and chairs and bins of craft supplies were set out, children's art was displayed alongside posters of the alphabet and weather words, and educational toys and books lined the shelves within easy reach of little hands. In the dining room, the words to a then-unfamiliar hymn were written in magic marker on plain brown craft paper and taped to the wall:

*People, look east. The time is near of the crowning of the year.
Make your house fair as you are able, trim the hearth and set the table.
People, look east and sing today: love, the Guest, is on the way.*

The hymn is "People, Look East," written by Eleanor Farjeon in 1928. It remains a favorite to me now.

I grew up in a family that loved special events, even if those events were regular Sunday dinners after church. We used the good china on pressed table linens, and feasted on family favorites or new recipes. My grandfather was a photographer, mom was a caterer, even my great-grandfather was a florist, and most of us inherited a love of entertaining. My grandmother, Mary Clark (Grandmary to us kids), had special Christmas décor that she loved putting out every year. The traditions showed joy in the anticipation: antique glass ornaments, partridge in a pear tree décor that Gramps made, her mother's gold-filigree china, the lantern in the upstairs window, the wreath on the mailbox lamppost, the annual gingerbread house construction. Grandmary passed down the tradition of gussying up and of setting aside time to make things special for Christmas.

Michelle Rudisill



Storybook Christmas

Advent Journal ~ December 2



My maternal grandfather, Carl Parris, had grown up in a family rich with love, but poor in material possessions. Therefore, the focus of Christmas was not on what gifts you received, but rather, the bonding & warmth of your family and celebrating Christ's birth.

Fast forward to my youth at the age of 9 when my grandparents attended a church that did not acknowledge Christmas as Christ's birthday. In fact, the preacher would demean Christmas as a holiday that marketers exploited to "take our money." The more he preached against Christmas, the more my grandfather became restless in his seat. At the end of services, the preacher was positioned at the exit to shake hands of the attendees. As my grandfather passed, he commented to the preacher, "I bet you don't believe in Santa Claus either" with a smile and a wink. Dumbfounded, the preacher nervously laughed in confusion.

Carl was a man of few words, so when he spoke, his words had a powerful meaning. On the ride home, my grandfather made a statement that has stayed with me a lifetime. He said, "We have one time a year to fully focus and celebrate Christ's birth. Never, ever, let someone take that away from you." Upon entering my grandparents' home, my grandfather showed me a Christmas card on the dining room table which read "Christ, the Reason for the Season." He smiled and nodded in agreement.

Luke 2:11 says "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." As the holidays approach and we enter a time of hurriedness in shopping, baking and preparing for the "big day," please take time to reflect on the true meaning of Christmas. This is a time to celebrate the birth of Jesus, our Lord and Savior. Christ came to this earth and loved us so much, that he died on the cross for our sins. Yes, Christ is truly the Reason for the Season.

Dan Crawford



Storybook Christmas

Advent Journal ~ December 3



"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience." Colossians 3:12

In a world of selfies and influencers, the virtues of kindness, compassion, and humility seem scarce. Yet many of us have gratefully experienced those qualities offered to us when we needed them most.

I was four years old and my brother only two when my thirty-year-old father died suddenly, unexpectedly. The life of our family had barely begun. My uncle, Woodrow Marsh (our Uncle Doe), and my aunt Gene, drove from Memphis, Tennessee, to Amarillo, Texas, to rescue our little bereft family. From that moment on, they were ever present in our lives.

They embraced us and our still-stunned mother with compassion, kindness, and gentleness. They packed our belongings, put us in a car, and drove us to their home in Memphis. For the next five years, my brother, my mother, and I shared two of the small bedrooms of their home. Blessed with the emotional support and safety net she needed, my mom went back to school – knowing as she left early for classes or studied late into the night that my brother and I were watched over and cared for. For those five years, we were dwelling in God's love together under that roof.

My uncle, who left for work in the afternoon and returned while we slept, spent his days working in the garage and around the house as my brother and I played in the yard. Though he didn't talk to us a lot, we always knew he was there, ready to fix a bike, repair a toy, or fuss when we got too near the street. He had a way of suddenly appearing when needed. Aunt Gene cooked for us, hugged us when we hurt, and nursed us when we were sick.

They took us camping and taught us the joys of nature. We learned to water ski in a small, old motorboat that my uncle always had to coax to run. We sang each evening around the campfire, while Uncle Doe played guitar. So much joy! Other campers would gravitate to our site to join in the singing.

When we finally moved out (just a block away), my uncle drove by our house after work every night to make sure everything looked safe. He was still there for us—to fix a car or repair a household item. Both Aunt Gene and Uncle Doe were always there to pick us up from school if we got sick.

My uncle and aunt were the model to us of the teachings of Christ and the love



of God: they were gentle, kind and steadfast. They were humble. They did not need a Facebook presence. They were ever present to lift us up with their unfailing love. Even today, they reside in my heart, and in the hearts of many people. Christ, living through Aunt Gene and Uncle Doe, became "God with us" – our Emmanuel. May Christ live through us each day in the same way.

Sandy Kovach



Storybook Christmas

Advent Journal ~ December 4



Bad Tidings of No Joy

I've been an optometrist in Maryville now for over forty years. As you can imagine, it's very rewarding to take a twelve-year-old to the office window, have them put on their first glasses, and watch their face light up when they see their new world, or let a teenager look in the mirror after putting in contact lenses to replace their thick-lensed glasses. I love seeing patients on their first day post op after cataract surgery when they start to see clearly again. These things are great perks of the job, and it's good to remember them over the years.

But sometimes a patient's blurred vision or headaches are not due to needing new glasses. What stays with you throughout the years is the unwanted news that you have to give on occasion. Sometimes I have to give "bad tidings of no joy." I will never forget telling a man who was excited about recently retiring that I found a malignant melanoma in his eye, or telling the friend who had a phobia about needles that to save her vision from diabetes she would need ongoing injections in her eye, or the young mother whose breast cancer return was evident in her eyes.

When the angel in Luke speaks, "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people," it's more than the kickoff to the Christmas season. It's hope for the future. This man who in his ministry would heal the sick, raise the dead, and restore sight to the blind would go on to defeat death for us.

No longer are we haunted by the news of loss and the grief of death. Advent ushers in the promise of light and life through Christ.

Those are truly good tidings of great joy.

Michael Kolarik



Storybook Christmas

Advent Journal ~ December 5



*Then Mary said,
"Here am I, the servant of the Lord;
let it be with me according to your word."
Luke 1: 38*

Shift Happens

This year I am struck by how quickly Mary accepts the news from Gabriel that she will bear God's child. In the space of a few short lines Gabriel tells her that she will become pregnant with God's child, and this child will rule over the house of Jacob forever. Mary asks a few questions of Gabriel and quickly responds with, "I am the servant of the Lord." In this astoundingly brief encounter, there begins a shift in the very fabric of the universe. Mary willingly accepts her part of this unfolding story.

I have always been someone who likes to try new things. Whether it is a new adventure or a new way of doing something, I generally jump at the chance to check it out. However over the years, I have become less and less eager to take on big changes in life. That is because change is difficult. Even the best transitions bring a significant amount of stress with them. Yet Mary steps willingly into this new territory of motherhood and Christ-bearer. Her willingness is an invitation to us to do the same. We, too, are invited to be a part of the new realm that God is bringing forth. Whether we feel reluctant or eager, may we find a way to say "Here I am, servant of the Lord."

Rachel Parsons-Wells



Compassion and Sustaining Life

Take time to reflect on the past year, the challenges and gifts, the unexpected joys and sorrows. Reflect on your rhythms of prayer and work, the ways they alternate, the ways they intersect.

Pray

How is pausing for prayer an act of service or justice? What are the elements of your daily/weekly/monthly or annual rhythms that nourish your soul, refill your spiritual stores to continue serving your family and community? Are there activities you might simplify, adapt, or let go of in the coming year?

Simplify

Take a media fast for a few days (no TV for example, or Facebook).

Nourish

Choose one day a week to prepare a simple, nutritious dinner, like rice and beans. Reflect on the abundance in your life. Remember those in your community living with food insecurity. Contribute food or money to a local food pantry. Or make a big pot of chili and share it with a neighbor.

Renew

Compost your vegetable cuttings. Composting returns carbon to the earth and creates rich soil to nourish plant life sustaining the earth. Learn more about soil, carbon, and sustainable living. Watch videos such as Kiss the Earth.

Grow Slow

Plant a seed or a cutting that will take a long time to grow. Watching things grow reminds us of what is to come and what is not-yet in the darkness. Reflect on what you are waiting and longing for that has not yet come to be.

Buy Less

Consider buying fewer things this year. Instead, go through your closet, kitchen, garage, or attic and find items you don't use anymore that might be useful to others. Donate them to KARM or another reputable charitable organization. When you do want to buy something, remember the enormous energy and material resources required to mass produce consumer products, and ask yourself if you really need something new before making the purchase.

How else might you move
toward a more meaningful and sustainable lifestyle?



Storybook Christmas

Advent Journal ~ December 6



I think my grandpa is brave, like David who fought a giant in the Bible. Grandpa Charlie went to war in Vietnam. He knew from a very young age that he wanted to be a pilot and worked very hard to become one. He became a first air commando. He flew a reconnaissance airplane. In fact, one time he was shot down and managed to get to safety.

During the Vietnam War there were many valiant efforts and sacrifices that were made. During this time, just like David's people, they were going through a hard time; and just like David, Grandpa Charlie stepped up to help them.

Reese Brown



Storybook Christmas

Advent Journal ~ December 7



As some of you know, I am a big fan of Winnie the Pooh. At times he has been my moral compass. That being said, when I thought about this advent these 2 quotes kept popping up.

If ever there is a tomorrow when we're not together...there is something you must remember. You are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem and smarter than you think. But the most important thing is even when we are apart...I'll always be with you.

The other is this:

If there ever comes a day when we cannot be together, keep me in your heart and I'll stay there forever.

This season for me has been one of transition, when I didn't always feel very brave, smart or strong. Even with a lot of people around, I felt alone. Then I think of Jesus' promise to be with us always. I remember the other times in my life when I felt alone and remember the Holy Spirit calming me. Jesus has been the one constant, the One who lifts me up, the One who takes my hand and walks with me.

This advent season will not be one of kids and grandkids, decorations and lots of shopping, but it will be one of church family and shopping for ChristmasWishes. It will be one of church services and carol singing. It will be the peace of knowing the promise that He is always with us. We do not walk this life alone.

Stephanie Bell



Storybook Christmas

Advent Journal ~ December 8



It was my first year in my first solo pastorate, and Christmas fell on a Sunday. That meant not going to my sister's home as usual. It was a small church, and we had a crowd on Christmas Eve, but I knew there would be only a few folks on Christmas Day.

I woke up Christmas morning to frozen pipes in the manse and had to call the property chair. I went to church without a shower. My mood was far from jolly. A mother and her grown daughter had invited me to Christmas lunch, and, as an introvert, I had mixed feelings about that. All in all it was shaping up to be a sad Christmas.

By the time the Christmas Day service was over, I had hot water again. And my dinner hosts were so welcoming and excited that by noon my mood had improved tremendously. They offered tea and cookies on my arrival, had a present or two for me to open, gave me a tour of their charming house, and prepared a delicious meal. By the time I left for home, I felt I had made two new friends.

My first Christmas away from family was not the sad affair it started out to be. A property chair and two women went out of their way, far beyond expectation, to make it a wonderful day in my new church.

I was reminded again, as we all need to be, that the gift of Christmas is presence, not presents.

Susan Reisinger



Storybook Christmas

Advent Journal ~ December 9



I was blessed to be born into a family with strong traditions, both faith and family traditions. The intersection of the traditions of family and faith bring my strongest memories with Christmas topping my list. My grandparents were all immigrants, strong in their faith and rooted in the Eastern Orthodox Church. Our tradition for Christmas started very early in the morning of Christmas Eve as the women of the family came together to begin the preparations for the Christmas Eve supper.

It was important that exactly 13 dishes were prepared for the meal, one for Christ and one for each of the disciples. Included in the meal must be foods with symbolic meaning: fish, cabbage, beets, mushrooms, dried peas, grains, dried fruits, nuts, poppy seeds and honey. It was also important to fast during the day of Christmas Eve; this always seemed wrong to me as a child because we were surrounded by temptations of the foods we were preparing, especially the sweets.

The table for the dinner was prepared by placing straw under the table cloth – a reminder of the humble stable where the Christ child was born. There had to be a place setting for everyone attending the meal, plus one to welcome the stranger who might appear at our door.

As evening approached, my grandfather would take all the children to the barn to visit and feed the animals, each getting a treat of pumpkin, as we were reminded of the sacred place of the animals who were in the stable to witness Christ's birth. On the way back to the farmhouse, the children gazed at the sky to see who could be the first to spot a star in the sky.

The appearance of the first star was the start of the celebration with my extended family gathered in my grandparents' farmhouse for *Wigilia*, Christmas Eve meal. It was a jam-packed celebration as my father was one of nine children who returned home for this evening with spouses and children.

No meat is a part of the Christmas Eve tradition. The meal started with a prayer then a *krupnik* toast celebrating the family, then always included in the feast; beet borscht, bread, fried fish, *pierogi* filled with potato and some with cabbage, split peas, stewed prunes and lima beans, mushroom gravy, beets with horseradish, *bobalki* (a dish made by soaking bread with hot water and honey and then sprinkling with ground poppy seeds), nut roll, and cookies filled with apricots.

Topping off the evening, an old family friend made a special visit to our family



before beginning his travels around the world. Santa Claus arrived to personally give one gift to each person and taking time to talk with each child about the past year and improvements for the coming year. And, yes, there were years where children received beautifully wrapped lumps of coal!

No matter where I am or how sad I may be, reflecting on these memories brings an overwhelming sense of joy that is difficult to contain. May the joy of Christmas fill your heart also!

Kathy Huczko



Storybook Christmas

Advent Journal ~ December 10



Christmas from the Inside Out

There is no question...New Providence is a beautiful church. There is also no question that the people of NewProv are the most beautiful thing about it! When I think of those who have shown me the meaning of Christmas and the truest beauty of the season, I think about our NewProv family. Christmas is a message of love "from the inside out." Caring for one another inside our walls and taking that care outside of our walls into the community is something we do very well. It is in those moments of caring service that our church family makes the love of Christ and the meaning of Christmas most clear.

When we open our doors to our neighbors, we bring the Christ child's message of welcome, acceptance and inclusion. The light from the star is within us. It shines out, and for me, the world seems brighter. God has blessed our family with so many blessings that we cannot contain them. They overflow, like gifts from the Magi, and spill out into the Welcome Table, the Apple Tree, the Community Benefit Sale, and making children's Christmas wishes come true. The faithful shepherds of our family guide us gently, leading us out of our wilderness back to the fellowship of the fold. We gather into groups of circles and squares as brothers and sisters: meeting, praying, comforting and supporting each other.

The Christmas story is the story of love. It is also the story of family: Mary, Joseph, and their newborn son at the beginning of their family story. The church is the continuation of that family. Because of Christ's birth, death, and resurrection we are reborn and become members of his body on earth. During Advent we wait with the holy family for the baby Jesus to be born. During the rest of our days, we wait with our church family for the Christ to return.

The "preacher" of Hebrews 9:28 tells us, "Christ was sacrificed once, to take away the sins of many. He will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him."

When I think of the truest meaning of Christmas I think of love and family. When I think of who exemplifies that meaning for me, I think of our family at



New Providence. I thank God for you and your love! Like every family, we are at our best together. During Advent time we wait hopefully together. While we wait, we serve faithfully together. At the end of time, when our waiting is over, we will rise up together to be with Christ forever! Hallelujah!

Beth Ragsdale-Smith

Prayer:

Fairest Lord Jesus, ruler of all nature. You are Son of God and son of man. You will we cherish. You will we honor. You are our soul's glory, joy, and crown. Oh, friend Jesus! None can be nearer. None can be fairer. None can be dearer than you are to us. Beautiful Savior, Lord of all nations! Worthy are you, the Lamb of God. May all glory, honor, praise, and adoration, belong to you now and forever! Amen. (from the hymn "Fairest Lord Jesus," author unknown)



Storybook Christmas

Advent Journal ~ December 11



I didn't know there was another way to do Christmas.

From the time I was born until my early teens, my family made the 42-mile pilgrimage from our Walden Circle home to "Vivian and Bernard's house" on Christmas Eve. There was the requisite catching up, overeating, and... PRESENTS! At least I think there was food and family chats. But I *know* there were...PRESENTS!

Now here I am 50+ years older than the 4-year-old me (in the front row, second from left), with the pouty lip and the severe crew cut. If I had to guess, I would imagine ol' grumpy face was not happy about posing for pictures instead of seeing what Santa had dropped off early.

Later, once all the wrapping paper was destroyed, my parents and my two siblings made our way to my grandparents' house to spend the night. It was a whopping 1.5 miles on the other side of town. But bed was the real destination at that point because there was more family magic in the works. I have so much appreciation now for the stealth of those elves to get all the kids' gifts sneaked in, assembled and/or wrapped, and waiting for us on Christmas morning. I'm sure breakfast happened in there somewhere, but again, I can't remember it.

What I **can** remember are those family gatherings. With the passing of each





year since, I think less about *what* I got than I think about *who* I miss. Those smiling faces were my parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. Of the twenty-four folks in the photo (including me), I know fifteen of them are gone. That leaves six cousins...three that I don't know anymore and three whom I rarely see. And I have no excuse for not seeing my sister and my aunt more often. What happened?

Life happened.

It's happened to all of us to some degree. People move or lose track or just get busy. So I understand how easy it is to get a little blue around the holidays. Especially if, like me, you no longer have the connections that you had for the first fourteen years of your life.

Fortunately for me, I had a get-off-your-pity-pony moment courtesy of Josh Groban (and David Foster and Richard James Page and Carol Bayer Sager for all you songwriter nerds). My ridiculously large Christmas music collection includes Josh's 2007 CD *Noël*. The track *Thankful* includes the lyrics:

So for tonight we pray for, what we know can be
And on this day we hope for, what we still can't see
It's up to us, to be the change, and even though we all can still do more
There's so much to be thankful for.

Nowadays, the get-togethers are smaller and the logistics are trickier, but the food is plenty good. So are the presents. But seeing family? That's the ticket! And for those years when things don't work out and the holidays are a bit quiet, there's still some joy to be found. Find it in a sunny day, a happy dog, a candlelight service. Because, there's so much to be thankful for. There really is.

Glenn Gardner



Storybook Christmas

Advent Journal ~ December 12



Remembering with Love

As I reflect on my faith journey, I see where God sent many people to help me on the way, in particular my grandmother and the Carrs.

My paternal grandmother was our babysitter. One of my earliest memories is having Crusade meetings on Wednesday nights in her home with children from the neighborhood. She led Bible Study lessons, taught us hymns, how to pray, and we saved our pennies and nickels for the offering. The offering was given to the church to help defray funeral expenses for our neighbors when needed. While it was not clear to me as a child, this was the beginning of me falling in love with God, an all-knowing and loving God; a good God who held the whole world and little old me in his/her hands. Later my parents enrolled us in St Timothy Lutheran School. The drill every morning was to have devotion led by the students, study Bible history and the catechism. I grew in my love for God during these years. When we joined the Presbyterian church, it felt very familiar to see Bible history and the catechism.

In my adult years, I met Rev. Stone and Mrs. Gloria Carr, they served our church with compassion and love. Our little congregation was struggling with loving one another and he and Mrs. Carr showed us what love looked like. They modeled for our congregation and taught us how to love one another. I am amazed at how often God sends what we need, just in time. They were knowledgeable, patient, humble, kind and a loving force. They also assisted in helping many, including me to discern God's call on our lives. I will always be thankful for meeting them on my faith journey.

As we take the 2021 Advent journey, I remember with love my grandmother, Mrs. Annie Mae Davis, and my mentors, Rev. Stone and Mrs. Gloria Carr, appreciating greatly for showing me "The Way."

Gloria Mencer



Remembering your Day with God: The Prayer of Examen

Looking for God's presence in your daily life is a simple and gentle way to pray.

The Prayer of Examen provides a flexible framework for this prayer for the end of the day. You may wish to pray this alone or with a friend or family members.

Simplify this prayer for the children in your life.

Light a candle.

Take a few minutes to quiet your soul. Rest and become aware of God's presence. Ask for light to see and know.

Journey back.

Think back through your day in God's presence focusing on the gifts of the day. Notice your work, the people you encountered, activities you engaged in, what you saw or touched. God is in the details!

Ask two questions.

What are you most grateful for? What are you least grateful for?
or
What gave you joy? What drained you?

Take note of these things.

You may wish to keep a daily examen journal to help you track the Spirit's movements over time.

Ask for guidance.

Ask the Holy Spirit to direct you to one thing that God thinks is particularly important. Let this one element guide your prayer. Spend time in prayer.

Look toward tomorrow.

Ask God to give you light for tomorrow's challenges. Pay attention to the feelings that surface as you look ahead. Allow these feelings to become a prayer.

Resources:

Sleeping with Bread by Dinnis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn, Matthew Linn

<https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-examen/>



Storybook Christmas

Advent Journal ~ December 13



Comfort Ye, My People

We hear it all the time. Faith will get you through. Keep the faith. We have all had a LOT of getting through to accomplish lately. As time went further into this pandemic, we went through the most incredible election in any of our memories, then an attack on what I have always held to be one of our most revered spaces. It became unimaginable what we were somehow getting through.

I was fearful and I began to feel hopeless and very confused, just like so many others. I realized I had to find a way out. Out of my head. Out of this twisted thinking. I had to find the joy. Any sort of comfort, ease or answer.

Where is God? Has He abandoned us? I went out into the yard. I tried clearing my thoughts completely and just focused on my surroundings. I thought so hard my head hurt from thinking.

So to the mountains I went. Always my go to in times of distress and confusion. It was there, standing at Clingman's Dome, looking out, feeling the breeze, basking in the dappled sunlight, that I was reassured. I heard and felt the voice of God. "I am here." This is what's real. This Creation. Mountains, trees, sky, grass, rocks, breezes. EVERY VALLEY SHALL BE EXALTED! This is eternal. Beyond hate. Beyond pandemics. It will still be there long after we've gone home.

I began to realize that in fact God had not abandoned us. Quite the opposite. All of our familiar was taken away, giving us the opportunity to focus on what IS real, what IS important. What we so often forget to even think about. Not the politics, not the ugliness. Creation and God's promises to us. His great love for us. THIS is what we need to have faith in. We are in the world, not of it. All the hubbub, all the unimaginable, it's of the world. We can rise above it and be comforted simply by surrendering to faith. Trust.

So this Advent we wait with great joy and welcome the Good News in an extraordinary way. We can put all the suffering aside and go to the manger. God is so adamant about what He thinks of us that He sent Jesus to show us once and for all how to live in the world, but not of it. Not a pandemic, or messy politics or hate and ugliness has the power to destroy us.

To me, the most wondrous aspect of the Good News is that it came as a messy squalling baby, in a tiny out of the way place. This baby who is God himself.



And that we are made in that image too! Now isn't that astounding?
REJOICE GREATLY, O DAUGHTER OF ZION. BEHOLD THY KING COMETH
UNTO YOU!

(I hear music all the time. During all this pondering, I have repeatedly heard the words of Handel's *Messiah*, which I have inserted above)

Peace and many blessings for a happy Christmas!

Marge Meredith



Storybook Christmas

Advent Journal ~ December 14



Joy and Delight

One of my favorite passages of scripture is Proverbs 8:22-31.

Proverbs 8:22-31 NRSV

The LORD created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth-when he had not yet made earth and fields, or the world's first bits of soil. When he established the heavens, I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep, when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep, when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.

What I like so much about this passage is that it gives us a much deeper insight into how God created the universe we live in. Whereas Genesis tells us what He did, this passage enlightens us as to the methodology. Here we learn that God and Wisdom are not the same. God came first and created Wisdom at the beginning of His work. Wisdom is the first expression of God. Wisdom comes from God, and creation comes from wisdom.

The nature of wisdom is joy and delight. This is how you can tell if a person is wise: they take joy and delight in life, and bring joy and delight to others. Joy, happiness, and grace are the signs of Wisdom and the wise.

A person who has wisdom has a good attitude because they understand that they are where they are because of their mindset, and further understand that it is their mind to set.

The Christmas season is a particularly good time to have a good attitude and be grateful for all that God has given us. Repenting of sin is a powerful way of getting closer to God. One of our lectionary readings gives us great insight into how God, in addition to giving us the physical world and the ability to attain wisdom has given us a path to forgiveness and salvation.

Luke 3:1-6 NRSV

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was



governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

John the Baptist, in fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah, is urging us to prepare for the arrival of Christ. I can think of no better way to celebrate the Christmas season.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for all of creation, and the gift of wisdom that you designed as the blueprint for creation. We thank you especially for giving us your son as the way to salvation. Amen

Harry Herrmann



Storybook Christmas

Advent Journal ~ December 15



As summer 2020 faded into early September, we packed up our big, beloved home in Turnberry Vista and headed north. For several years, Jim and I had pondered having two houses—one in Minnesota and one in North Carolina—to achieve our goal of being able to be close to both of our daughters and four precious grandchildren. Some thought it was a crazy idea and others offered great support. When the “Sold” sign went up in front of the house, it was real. A sense of loss coupled with anxiety set in. We would leave behind dear friends, my job, and almost all that was familiar — almost 30 years of memories. That summer had been full of all the “lasts,” such as the last in-person Geneva group dinner on “Mt. Kolarik” with hugs and some tears until we would meet again on Zoom. On moving day, a dear friend and former coworker from Knoxville offered her presence to help me and keep me emotionally grounded. What a gift that was! A day later, we pulled out of the driveway with mixed emotions, sad to leave what had been good and familiar but excited to begin a new adventure and phase in our lives.

“Do not be afraid, for I am with you.” (Isaiah 41:10)

We arrived in Minneapolis a few days later to the excited welcome of Graham and Pippa waving and holding “Welcome Nana and Papa!” signs while standing in front of our new home. We knew we had made the right choice.

Before long, Christmas season came and for once, I agreed with Jim that we didn’t have to have a tree given that we were still, to some degree, in move-in mode. Nevertheless, several days later Meredith stopped by with a small table top tree in a planter to make things seem a bit more traditional. On Christmas Eve, a snowstorm began — the first of the winter — and cold, dark, often windy nights became the norm. Twinkling lights of the season decorated most of the houses and shone brightly against the snow on the roofs and on the ground. While I sat in our living room, aglow with candles, I binge-watched Christmas Eve church services via the Internet. First, I watched NPPC’s Christmas Eve service followed by a pre-recorded children’s service from Cary (NC) Presbyterian Church which featured our grandsons, Charlie and Ben. Then I watched the pre-recorded Christmas Eve service from St. Luke’s Presbyterian in Dunwoody, Georgia, where my sister directed their annual children’s Christmas program, adapted to meet the demands of COVID-19 pandemic. It was indeed a holy night and all felt right with the world.

Christmas morning was different. Instead of my usual brunch with everyone, Jim and I experienced Christmas excitement with Graham and Pippa at their house. Festive love and joy filled the air. Our tradition of Jim cooking Christmas



dinner changed, too. Even though family was just a block and a half down the street, COVID-19 precautions kept us from eating dinner together. We split the food between the two houses and, via FaceTime, we were able to share a feeling of togetherness with Emily's family in North Carolina as well.

I recalled the quote that Meredith had written to Emily as she left for her freshman year in college, "No matter where you are, the stars will always shine." All different, yet all still familiar. All was calm, and all was bright.

*Dear God,
Thank you for the knowns and also the unknowns in our lives. Help us experience new journeys and take on new challenges while keeping us anchored with your steadfast love. Amen.*

Janice Utt



Storybook Christmas

Advent Journal ~ December 16



My Christmas story involves two wonderful characters: one a human and the other a rat.

Years ago before I met her, my wife Debbie sat alone in her condo on Christmas Eve. She had gone through a painful divorce from her first husband. Her family was out of town and for the first time in her life she was alone for Christmas. Fighting despair, she went alone to a theater to see a Disney animation - *Ratatouille*.

She watched as Remy (a lovable rat with dreams of becoming a chef) was violently chased from his home. Separated from his family, he is left alone in the dark, dank sewers of Paris. Not giving into grief, he climbs and climbs until he reaches an attic window. There before him lies the City of Light! A whole new unimaginable world lay within his reach. Out of despair comes hope!

Later that night before going to bed she read the Christmas story from her Bible. She imagined the shepherds in the field looking up at the angels proclaiming the birth of Jesus from the real City of Light and felt a peace wash over her unlike anything she had ever felt before.

My wife is a lady of great Christian faith. Her grandmother would take her into the woods near her home where she had a quiet place by an old log for daily prayer. Her faith was not diminished by the loss of her 8-month-old baby brother to meningitis when she was seven years old, nor to the burning down of her home just three months later when her family lost everything.

She passed along that faith to her son who now serves as the minister of music at a local church. And she bolsters my own faith. Each subsequent Christmas we give thanks for the birth of Jesus, our blessings and family, and for that little rat who opened our eyes to the wonders before us.

Romans 15:13

Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost.

Craig Jarvis



Storybook Christmas

Advent Journal ~ December 17



My Grandfather's Gift

From as early as I can remember, I awoke every Christmas morning to find gifts under the tree. I had been told it was Jesus' birthday and I wondered what gifts he might have received as he was growing up. Time moved on, and as I got older there seemed to be an increasing emphasis in the gifting aspect of Christmas. Advertisements for current trendy and popular gifts of all sorts, store displays of decorations and the playing of Christmas music started well before the Advent season and came earlier every year, seemingly to encourage us to buy more gifts.

There was one simple gift, though, one constant thing I could count on each year. Every Christmas for as long as he lived, my grandfather gave me five dollars. He would hand the \$5 bill to me and then sit down with me for a talk about Jesus' birth and what it meant to humankind. This 20-minute explanation from him resulted in my learning that throughout Jesus' life, God was preparing him to take on the sins of the world, blessing us all and giving us the promise of life everlasting. He always had a knack for being able to explain things to me so that, even as a child, I could understand and believe. This was my grandfather's greatest gift to me.

I still miss those \$5 bills and 20-minute talks with him. This was a gift that never changed and shaped my understanding of what we believe about Jesus' birth and God's everlasting gifts.

During this Advent season, may we appreciate and understand God's never-changing gifts.

Don Payne



Storybook Christmas

Advent Journal ~ December 18



A Christmas Memory

My first, and very special, memory of New Providence is when I became a member on December 24, 1967, just four days after Duncan and I married in a small Cumberland Presbyterian Church in West Tennessee. The first time I set foot inside the church was that Christmas Eve Sunday morning when I met with the Session in a called meeting where my letter of transfer was accepted from my home church. Later, during the morning worship service, then minister Reverend Barnett Eby asked Ensign Crawford to escort his bride to the Chancel where he welcomed me to the church membership. After more than fifty years I don't remember exactly how I felt that day when asked to come to the front of a new church, although I am sure I was much more comfortable that my husband was asked to accompany me. After all, this was a much larger church than the one to which I was accustomed, and I would meet so many new people. Many years later, what I do remember is the warm reception I received and how everyone made me feel so much at home.

An interesting link to New Providence was discovered while Duncan and I lived in Naples, Italy, where his ship, the *USS Tallahatchie County*, was homeported. A new commanding officer reported aboard in February 1969, and we learned that CDR Ian Johnson and his wife, Carolyn, who had lived with the Ebys while she was in school, were married by Dr. Eby in 1951 while he was pastor of a Presbyterian church in Elmira, New York.

As we read the Christmas story in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke this Advent season, I wonder if Mary felt anxious about how she would be received by Joseph's family and friends when they returned home to Nazareth after the birth of Jesus. My hope is that New Providence will always be as welcoming to new members as they were to a young bride that long ago December.

Margaret Ellen Crawford



Storybook Christmas

Advent Journal ~ December 19



"In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" – Acts 20:35

This is an example of how my grandparents lived. Every Christmas Eve in Mississippi was family time at their home enjoying dinner, opening gifts and shooting fireworks. Without fail, at some point during this evening there would be a couple of knocks at the door. A guest? A visit from a friend? My grandfather owned a sawmill, and his men knew if they needed a little something extra for the holiday, he was there for them. These brief interruptions were a part of our holiday season. Pops worked hard to be able to give. He gave his time for those in need throughout his life as he served in our community. And as the mayor, he continued putting the needs of our small community first.

Now when Christmas comes each year, we find a way to carry on our giving tradition. From the time my son was younger, we found an Angel Tree, and carefully chose a child and all pitched in to give them a happy Christmas.

Giving of ourselves to help others have a more cheerful Christmas provides the memories of those brief visits on Christmas Eve when someone needed just a little something extra.

"And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people." – Luke 2:10

During my upbringing this verse was instilled in my core belief not to fear, and to give joy to all people which was the message of our small town. These holidays bring people of all walks of life together. Although challenges in my life have been great, the strong foundation of my belief that God is love has given me peace throughout the years. My faith remains strong in the joy of knowing God's love is for all. May you have a blessed Christmas.

Blessings,
Natalie Stephens



Storybook Christmas

Advent Journal ~ December 20



We are all living in a world together with individual problems, weaknesses, hang-ups, illnesses and sometimes loneliness....even when we are surrounded by many. Depression lurks in our minds, and we can sometimes feel inadequate. Jesus tells us that we are loved and accepted and children of the King of all Kings! The Lord came down to us as a babe in a manger to save us as the ultimate sacrifice. All we have to do is accept Him as our Lord and Savior.

God offers grace to us all. No matter what we are going through, God's gift of that baby can lift our spirits and give us peace, love, hope, mercy and the promise of eternal salvation. What better time than Christmas to celebrate the birth of our sweet Jesus! We need to ring bells, sing to the heavens, and spread His love.

Oftentimes, the messages of God can be found all around us. Every time the rainbow comes after a bad storm, every time a baby is born, every sunrise and sunset that we see, every mountaintop that we experience, every tear we wipe away from a hurting loved one and every hug we give, we are experiencing the awesomeness of God! We can even see God's love shown in the books we read, the words in beautiful sacred songs, some television shows and movies, and even paralleled in children's stories passed on down the generations. Watching *Little House on the Prairie* and *The Waltons*, we find lessons on love, family and what truly matters in life in sweet storylines. Our songs can portray the love of Christ in beautiful tunes to our ears. Books such as the *Velveteen Rabbit* tell us no matter how bad we look to the eye it is all of the hard times and what we go through and how shabby we are that truly makes us beautiful in the eyes of the beholder. Love is all that matters.

The *Winnie the Pooh* series of books and movies show characters that are anxious (Piglet), depressive (Eeyore), that live in the moment (Tigger), wise and also foolish (Owl), micromanagers (Rabbit), meandering (Pooh), and facing challenges like Christopher Robin. With all of their deficits they work together to experience the wonders of the world. We can all learn from them to love each other and help one another despite our flaws.

This great big world is navigable when we unite in the love of God and bestow that same grace with one another. Remember that sometimes the small things in life are the most important. Living life one day at a time and doing our best is all we can do. Loving with our whole heart is the goal for each and every one of us.



The greatest gift in life comes from the cross, but we want to celebrate the birthday of our sweet Jesus who came to walk among us, taught us to love and showed us compassion. He walked among us despite all of the foibles that we possess.

I wish all of my church family a beautiful and meaningful Merry Christmas. I love each one of you. Let us all wish Jesus a happy birthday!

LynnEllen Fox



Storybook Christmas

Advent Journal ~ December 21



Luke 1:46-55

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Sometimes when I think back on what I used to treasure, I am amazed – and not in a good way. As a kid I actually liked canned asparagus. I'm not lying. With mayonnaise, or even without. I used to wear dresses with shoulder pads, and thought they looked good. (I know I'm not alone with that penchant.) Some people reading this may love canned asparagus or shoulder pads as fashion, and to you I mean no disrespect. It's just that my tastes have changed, as I've been exposed to other things (like fresh asparagus).

As we on the Green Team have been exploring and implementing the benefits of native plants while installing the church's pollinator garden, I realize that my tastes have changed regarding landscaping. Those big-box showy blooms are gorgeous, to be sure. But as I learn more about the interplay between the plants, insects, animals, and microbes that have all evolved together in a place, I have come to see the beauty in the flowers, leaves, and stems that call our local woods and meadows home.

I am reminded, again, that while we humans might think we are taking something from nature and doing one better, in reality we can't improve on Creation as God intended it to be. Sometimes that's hard to accept, and it takes a leap of faith to trust that God's way might be better. Mary was dubious when she first heard the news from Gabriel of her impending pregnancy, but she knew instinctively that God's way could not be wrong. That to assume she knew better was to be full of hubris. She knew that God would "look with favor on the lowliness of his servant," and "bring down the powerful from their thrones."

We would be wise to see anew the Creation around us and to see how it "magnifies the Lord."

Ginny Ayers



Storybook Christmas

Advent Journal ~ December 22



We all love to sing and listen to the old Christmas hymns like “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” So, last Advent our adult Sunday school class listened (on Zoom) to beautiful choirs and symphonies playing some of these hymns. What a delightful Zooming it was! Then we read and focused on the words. We realized that although we have enjoyed these hymns our whole lives most of us had not really pondered the words. We were surprised to discover that the words written over a hundred years ago could speak to the longing of our hearts today. The third stanza says:

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

As we discussed these words, we felt this is our prayer for today. How much we desire to be of one heart and mind and to end all these conflicts between us! What a gift if the whole world were filled with peace! And the song ends with the astonishing chorus: “Rejoice! Rejoice!”

Christ has come and is with us. Others have carried this faith through the ages during the history of our world’s senseless conflicts and violent wars. We long for peace. We long to rejoice. We long for the faith of our ancestors.

O come, O come, Emmanuel to us this day. Amen.

May you have a blessed Advent season.

Teal Willoughby



Storybook Christmas

Advent Journal ~ December 23



Let's be honest. How many of us think of God first when it comes to Christmas? I think of family and the food. Little kids, I am sure, think of presents. Some out there in the business and entrepreneurial world think about the next money maker. Whatever we think about, it is seldom God. In today's world of money and electronics, there is a daily reminder that we can't imagine a world without one or the other. I am not going to say we all need to stop thinking about money and electronics forever. There is a common link between now and when Jesus was born though. Jesus ushered in hope and new ways of doing things. Electronics and money are like the Jewish priests and traditions. Both are necessary; yet, they have their extents. Electronics and money can tear families apart and lower morale. Jewish priests expelled people for a small infraction, families were separated on the grounds named in Deuteronomy and Numbers. Both examples show power corrupting. The Jewish priests descended in their faith, and money/electronics make the rich happy. But here is where the miracle of Jesus comes in. He changed the minds of Sanhedrin members Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. He blessed the poor widow who put in all she had into the temple. Jesus changed the social structure of Israel and is offering help to America.

The three kings gave him gold, frankincense, and myrrh. What about salt? Roman soldiers were paid in salt, what about a king? Salt and gold were the highest offering for Romans and Egyptians. Mansa Musa annoyed the banker of Egypt because he threw salt and gold during his journey to Mecca. Frankincense and myrrh were used in incense as medicine and for embalming. Gold is very valuable. So, the three kings gave Jesus what is fitting for both a priest and a king. Salt was only valuable as a preserver. So salt was not very useful for a king or priest.

This country is in need of Jesus. The divisions run deep, and political divide goes far. Injustices pile up leaving us to wonder where our freedom is. We are put in a little box of understanding, and we have the power to get out but don't want to. Jesus is waiting with frankincense and myrrh, ready to share the riches of heaven and heal our injuries. Advent is the time to remember that, the time to say, "Lord, heal me so that I may serve you in this world." This is the time for us to be servants of the Lord, not anything else. That may mean spending time with family or giving your neighbor something to sustain them. The point is like a benediction: we heal and are sent out to share the good news and help our neighbors. Songs can help us remember that. Songs like, "War is Over," "O Come O Come Emmanuel," and "Old City Bar" (Trans-Siberian Orchestra).

Faith Hanshaw



Praying with your Body

Including your body in your time of prayer can stimulate the deeper prayer within. Simple movement, even with just one hand, can express prayers offered to God. You may wish to explore this on your own in solitude. Praying the chalice prayer below may give you some ideas for other gestures to include in your prayer. Walking a labyrinth is also an embodied prayer.

The Chalice prayer can be done sitting or standing. Make sure you have enough space around you to extend your arms out to your sides. As you begin feel your feet connected to the floor or ground.

The prayer has four gestures and intentions.

Begin with hands in prayer position in front of your chest (think 'namaste' as in Eastern practices). Breathe deeply three times in this position.

Intention: *Waiting or preparing the heart.*

Hands and arms move upward to open above you, forming the cup of the chalice. Allow your eyes to follow and gaze upward. Breathe deeply three times here.

Intention: *Receive a gift or allow God's way with you.*

Hands return to your body, placed over your heart or on your belly, acknowledging the stem of the chalice. Breathe deeply three times here.

Intention: *Taking the gift into yourself or accepting what God has for you, named or not.*

Hands and arms move outward and extending forward then outward from your sides, describing the base of the chalice. Breathe deeply three times here.

Intention: *Share the gift with others and the world or to attend what is before you.*

Repeat the prayer a few times in your own timing.

Reflect on your experience of praying with your body.

What did you notice about bringing your physical self to prayer?

Resources:

Praying with Body and Soul by Jane E. Vennard



Storybook Christmas

Advent Journal ~ December 24



Throughout the season of Advent, we've been hearing the stories of scripture up against the stories of everyday life—memories of Christmases gone by, familiar seasonal stories like the Grinch, Ebenezer Scrooge, and Charlie Brown.

At the risk of becoming an evangelist for AppleTV+, the story that's running through my head these days is *Ted Lasso*. I encourage you to watch the Christmas episode (S2, E4). [Pro tip: the 7-day free trial will let you binge both seasons in that time!] If you don't know Ted, he's the American "football" coach hired to lead a British "football" team... and you know those are very different sports in those two countries.

Still, Ted is as likeable and relatable a character as you can imagine, with a stellar cast that just works. One of the quirkiest of the ensemble is Mr. Leslie Higgins ("I'm a feminine junior," he says, in the best British accent ever), the director of football operations; he is as geeky as they come. Leslie and his wife and five sons always invite players to their home for Christmas dinner; usually they get one or two, most times none.

But (spoiler alert!) the year Coach Lasso arrives, the whole team shows up for dinner, each of them bringing some special dish from their own home country. The table keeps getting longer and longer and longer. And the joy is infectious, not because everything's just right, but because they're together. Something about Ted's leadership has helped them to realize that being a team is what matters.

In between college and seminary, I lived in Nashville for three years and rented a house on Duncanwood Drive with two other friends, one a music biz writer from California, one a nurse from Oak Ridge. None of us ever had time to go home for Thanksgiving, so we started inviting everyone we knew with nowhere else to go to join us for the Turkey Bowl at "The Duncanwood Home for Unwed Women" (read that carefully). There were football games in the front yard and copious amounts of food. At the beginning of each Thanksgiving week, we'd expect 4 or 5 people to join us. When the day arrived, we usually had 35+. Those may still be my best Thanksgiving memories.

Rewind to a stable in Bethlehem 2000ish years ago—probably the last place in the world Mary and Joseph wanted to be. We can speculate all we want about what that night was like, but it almost certainly wasn't a storybook setting. This is not their home, and any local relatives are so distant as to not be troubled. Mary is almost certainly young and scared, Joseph is a new father and scared, the animals don't appreciate this intrusion into their space, so they're scared.



But from this group of misfits, a child enters the world who will (as the gospel of John says) “draw all peoples unto myself.”

What if those longer and longer tables—or stables—might be the hallmark of our Christmases this year? I’m certain you know someone who is alone...or maybe you are yourself. How about a walk through the neighborhood, or a knock on another’s door? Surely you can squeeze in one more seat at the table, or wrap up a jar of jelly for a gift. It’s not about how perfect is it... it’s about being together.

The older I get, the more I’m convinced that the Christmas message is not just about baby Jesus... it’s about how baby Jesus draws all those people to the manger to welcome him, and to connect with one another. Even us. Even us.

Merry Christmas to you all...

Emily Anderson

