A JOURNEY OF MEMORIES

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Quilts by Susan Blank

Presbyterians Today | 2016 Advent Calendar
Advent is a time of remembering. In the weeks before Christmas we watch, wait, and prepare for the coming of Jesus Christ. We read Scriptures and practice church traditions that have been around for thousands of years. In our homes we put up lights, bake holiday treats, and sing songs to celebrate and remember Christ's birth.

This devotional is a journey of memories—of sights, smells, tastes, and sounds that point to the promises of God in Jesus Christ. They are the daily incarnations of our faith. When does a touch remind us of Jesus? Can a candle bring God's hope to a dark room? Can a smell take us to a holy place?

We no longer have Christ with us in the flesh, but we can still experience the joy and wonder of Christ's birth with the senses God has given us. We can still point to Christ's coming by using our sense of touch, our sense of sight, and our other senses. The prophet Isaiah promises that the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh shall see it together (40:5). It is my hope that during Advent you will remember and share the way Christ has touched your life.
Patchwork treasures
*Deuteronomy 32:7*

Every time we read the Bible, we remember the days of old. Every time we sing an Advent hymn or Christmas hymn, we remember the years long past. Every time we take Communion, we remember the promises of God.

We are like a quilt, each of us holding a treasured patch of memory from different times and places—a flash of insight, a favorite song, a vision of beauty, a proclamation worth sharing. We stitch these different patches into a whole as we pass along the stories of God from one generation to the next. Through Advent we will remember the Scriptures, traditions, and experiences that help us experience God and love one another.

What are your treasured memories of Advent and Christmas?

*Lord, bless this season of Advent as we remember the stories that show us your love and forgiveness throughout history. Amen.*
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<th>Monday, November 28</th>
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<td><strong>God’s handiwork</strong></td>
<td><strong>Gifts and gratitude</strong></td>
<td><strong>Never forgotten</strong></td>
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<td><em>Genesis 1:1</em></td>
<td><em>Genesis 3:21</em></td>
<td><em>Isaiah 49:14–15</em></td>
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<td>I remember walking into the kitchen one morning and finding a trail of white Styrofoam bits leading from the kitchen to the playroom. My five-year-old had taken packing material out of the trash and was sitting on the floor, carving it with a butter knife. Seeing her intent in her creative work, I was reminded of Michelangelo’s quote “I saw an angel in the marble and I carved until I set him free.”</td>
<td>Unexpected gifts can be the most meaningful, if we can manage to receive them with an honest and joyful “Thank you!” rather than one tinged with embarrassment or shame for not having a gift to give in return.</td>
<td>Most of us have experienced stress dreams. Mine have always been related to work. In my first career as a radio DJ I’d dream that one song had ended and I’d forgotten to get another one ready. In the dream I’d be talking and talking while trying to find the next song—and I never could. As a pastor, I sometimes bolt upright in bed convinced I have forgotten to show up for a midnight worship service (that has never existed!).</td>
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<td>God, our creator, seeks to reveal the holy in each of us. God is always working on us, chipping away some rough edges, adding a little depth here or curve there. During Advent we remember that we are created in the image of God. In Jesus Christ, God sets the most beautiful parts of us free.</td>
<td>As we enter the Advent season, we remember that God has been gifting humanity from the beginning. In Genesis 3 Adam and Eve disobey God by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and they feel shame in their nakedness. Yet in their sin, the Lord gifts them with God-sewn garments. We remember the great gift of Jesus, knowing that we could never offer a comparable gift in return. God gives the gift of Christ out of his love for us. Our reply is a life lived in joy and thanksgiving.</td>
<td>While there are things that you and I may worry about forgetting, the good news is that God does not. God remembers us. We can trust that God has the next song ready for our lives. God will show up, even in our darkest nights.</td>
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<tr>
<td>In what ways do you feel made in the image of God?</td>
<td>Have you ever received a gift without buying one in return?</td>
<td>What do you worry about forgetting? How do you remember God’s promises?</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Lord, we give you thanks that we are made in your image. Amen.</em></td>
<td><em>God, thank you for Jesus Christ. May my life be lived in gracious thanksgiving.</em></td>
<td><em>God, we trust that your memory is better than ours. Thank you for remembering us.</em></td>
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Thursday, December 1

Blessed gatherings

*Genesis 49:1*

Christmas Day was rowdy when I was a child. We spent the evening in my grandmother’s small ranch house. Six sons plus six wives and assorted kids meant overlapping conversations, laughter, and even singing. Christmas was a far cry from a silent night.

Our holiday was a holy ruckus, as I imagine most of Jacob’s were with 12 sons! In Genesis 49 Jacob calls his sons together as he is dying. Gathering is what we do to mark milestones. During Advent, we remember that through Christ we will be gathered to God. Nations will stream to the holy mountain. All people will come for a great banquet. We will shout with joy and be awed by God’s glory.

How have your family gatherings influenced your vision of God’s great gathering?

Lord, we look forward to the awe of your great family gathering. May our joy in the Advent season whet our appetites for more.

Friday, December 2

Always attuned

*Exodus 6:5*

Sometimes we forget God. There, I said it. Sometimes we are so busy at work and so overwhelmed with responsibilities that we hardly have enough energy to get through the week, let alone attend worship or Bible study or prayer group. Like the Israelites when they were slaves in Egypt, we groan under the heavy burden of our own responsibilities. In the hectic run-up to Christmas, sometimes the Lord may not be on our minds. But we are on God’s mind.

God overhears our cries, even when we are just moaning and groaning to each other. The cries of the Israelites went up to God. God took notice of them and, remembering the covenant, delivered them from oppression. During Advent, we remember stories of God’s deliverance in anticipation of the coming of Christ.

Can you remember a time when you felt overheard by God?

Jesus, may we never forget that you hear us and respond to our needs.

Saturday, December 3

Sensing the sacred

*Exodus 30:22–25*

The path I walked to the New Jersey beach had an unmistakable smell. The blooming honeysuckle mixed with wet sand and a hint of oceanic decay is linked to powerful memories of the fun and freedom of childhood vacations. One whiff of honeysuckle and I’m 10 years old again.

The smell of gingerbread or a sanctuary filled with pine or Grandma’s rose talcum allows us to reexperience certain moments in our lives almost instantly. It’s no wonder that the Bible has a special recipe for fragrant anointing oil. Our sense of smell can allow us to reexperience special moments. Though we don’t think of it often, the smell of bread or a church basement can remind us of God’s presence with us.

What smells do you associate with church? With well-being?

Lord, thank you for the many ways you connect with us, even the ones we don’t think of, like smell, taste, and touch.
Savoring God’s presence

Psalm 119:103

One Christmas I forgot to buy bagels.

“Mom,” my youngest child said, “bagels are a Christmas tradition.”

What? I thought. Bagels are not a Christmas tradition! Then I remembered that to make Christmas breakfast simple, we’d served bagels the past three or four years. That was half my child’s life! To her, bagels were a meaningful part of Christmas morning.

We can have Christmas morning without bagels in the same way that we can have life without God. We can go through the same motions, but feel as if something is missing. Advent is a time where we intentionally remember God. We can slow down and savor the sweetness of God’s presence with us.

Have certain foods been part of your Advent or Christmas traditions? What feelings do they evoke?

God, thank you for the sweet gift of Christ Jesus and the traditions that help us remember him.
**Monday, December 5**

**Stories for the ages**  
*Deuteronomy 4:9*

“Remember that time Grandma tossed baby Ed out the front door instead of the cat?”

“When you were an infant, we used to hear you singing yourself to sleep in the crib!”

Family gatherings are a time to share our stories with our children and grandchildren. Embedded in those stories are our history, values, and love. Bible stories are no different. During Advent we share the stories, prophecies, and events that have sustained believers for thousands of years.

Over time, we may forget the stories. But if we’ve shared them, a new generation will keep them and comfort us with them when our eyes have failed and the memories have slipped away.

Which of God’s stories do you want to pass on to another generation? Which stories would you like someone to tell you?

Lord, you remind us to make your story known to the children. Give us the words, illustrations, and inspiration to do so effectively.

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**Tuesday, December 6**

**Top of the list**  
*Matthew 28:20*

There are so many things to remember in a day. We make Christmas card lists, to-do lists, prayer lists, grocery lists, Christmas pageant lists, and checklists so that we don’t forget. But there is probably one thing that we forget to put on our lists. It’s the thing that Jesus tells his disciples—and us—to remember most. It’s this: I am with you always, to the end of the age.

Jesus is with us. Always. He’s with us when we are rushing to the daycare, writing Christmas cards, crunching through our to-do list at work, and corralling the sheep and shepherds for the Christmas pageant.

“Remember,” Jesus whispers in the midst of our mad dashes, “I am with you. You are at the top of my list.”

How do you “remember” Jesus in the busy times?

Jesus, remind us of your presence when the days feel long and schedules get crazy.

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**Wednesday, December 7**

**Slowing down**  
*Isaiah 51:4*

I remember my daughter’s first year of preschool. She hadn’t learned how to be still; so at circle time she would sit lovingly restrained on one teacher’s lap while the other teacher read a story.

Heeding God’s teaching can be difficult if we never are still long enough to listen. Too often we long to get to the next thing or to break free of the circumstances rather than wait patiently for God’s instruction. Ironically, that same daughter is now a yoga instructor, telling her students to slow down, breathe deeply, and open up to the holy. To listen to God we must first quiet the chatter of our own hearts and minds.

Can you recall a time when you had to slow down to absorb a teaching?

God, thank you for the hands-on teaching of Jesus Christ, who showed us how to be a light for all.
Thursday, December 8

The power of a touch
Daniel 10:10

The car came to a halt in the night. I must have been about six. My sisters rustled beside me, but I didn’t open my eyes. A few moments later I could feel my father’s arms scooping me up to carry me into the house. I woke enough to enjoy the childlike luxury of being carried instead of stumbling in on my own. It felt like a guilty pleasure since I could have walked.

God touches Daniel to lift him out of a deep and dark sleep. He lifts him and reminds him that he is a man who is greatly loved. The right touch can remind us that we are safe and secure. It can carry the powerful message that we are God’s beloved.

Can you remember a time that a touch allowed you to experience something of God?

Lord, lift us out of our darkness and into the peace of Christ.

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Friday, December 9

The bread of homecoming
Matthew 26:26

I’m not sure where the Communion bread recipe came from in the church where I grew up. Every time I taste something like it, I feel as if I’ve come home, wherever I happen to be. When I visit other churches, the juice seems to always taste the same, but the bread is different. Sometimes it’s broken matzo. Sometimes it’s torn white bread. Sometimes it’s sweet shortbread.

Whatever the bread, during Communion we remember the promises that Jesus revealed at the Last Supper. We eat and drink together, tasting eternity as the words remind us that we are loved and forgiven. The God of the universe broke bread with us and told us, “Remember me.” The God of creation invites us home.

What is your earliest memory of Communion?

Jesus, we offer our thanks for the meal you’ve shared with us and look forward to the great feast of eternity.

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Saturday, December 10

Envisioning God’s love
Matthew 20:34

In the Gospels, Jesus touches the eyes of blind men so they may see. How amazing that blind men had insight before sight! Before they could even see him they called out to him as the Messiah. They knew who Jesus was before the miraculous healing.

Our spiritual vision may not be so sharp. But what we see at Christmas helps us to remember God’s promises through Christ. There are lights shining in the darkness, manger scenes on mantles, and angels in yards. We tell the story of Christ’s birth each year, using our decorations to share the story. The sights of Christmas give us insight into the great love of God.

What insights do you seek to share through your decorations?

Lord, thank you for the gifts of sight and insight. May they each deepen our experience of remembering Christ’s birth.
Heeding a call

_Deuteronomy 4:12_

Once while reading in the living room I heard running water. I could see the sun shining through the window, so I knew the roof wasn’t leaking. I got up and walked around the house—the dishwasher was off, the basement was quiet. So I sat back down into my comfy chair. A short time later I heard it again, so I went to the basement—and discovered the washer leaking everywhere!

This is how God speaks to us, capturing our attention and encouraging us to investigate further. We hear God’s call before we can see how it might play out in our lives. God spoke to give the Israelites the Ten Commandments, but they couldn’t see how the rules would shape their experience until they started living by them!

How do you recall hearing God?

_God, you call to us in ways that are challenging to hear and difficult to imagine. Give us ears to hear what you are saying._
Monday, December 12

**Heaven and earth**

*Psalm 78:35*

I have a picture of my eight- and five-year-old daughters sitting on the edge of a cliff in the mountains of Colorado. It looks as if they are sitting at the intersection of heaven and earth as the blue stretches out above the vast mountains.

When I look at that photo, I remember that God is both rock and sky—tangible and intangible. Jesus’ birth anchors God’s love in a baby that can be held. But we could never hold it all! Jesus shows us that redemption has two parts, the earthly and the heavenly. Christ is the solid rock that upholds us, anchors us. The Holy Spirit is the wind and sky, beckoning us to something bigger and greater than we could ever imagine.

Can you remember a time when Jesus’ love felt solid and earthy?

*Lord, thank you for a love so intimate it can be felt and so vast it can’t be imagined.*

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Tuesday, December 13

**Overcoming shame**

*Psalm 25:7*

We all have cringe-worthy moments, times when we have done things that were wrong. The fight in high school, the trust we betrayed, the flip comment at work.

Not all of our memories are good ones. Some choices circle back into our lives with haunting regularity.

The psalmist is asking God to set aside those cringe-worthy moments, saying, Remember me, the whole me, through the lens of your love!

And God does. In Jesus we see how God sets aside past mistakes to love the whole person—the adulterers, the tax collectors, even those who would deny and betray him.

How would our lives change if we remembered ourselves and others in light of God’s love rather than cringe-worthy moments?

*Forgiver of sin, we are so grateful that you see us through lens of your steadfast love.*

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Wednesday, December 14

**Touched by love**

*Luke 6:19*

My friend Jessica remembers the power of setting up the family Nativity scene. Each year she and her mother would put on their favorite Christmas album and carefully unwrap each piece of their Armani set and create the scene. Holding each piece allowed them to remember through touch Mary’s deep love, Joseph’s strength, Jesus’ innocence, and the wonder and awe of kings and shepherds. It was a sacramental moment that connected them to the power of the story.

People longed for the healing that came from touching Jesus. They reached out to him, confident that if they could brush even his garments they would be healed. Thumbing through the Bible, lighting candles, and holding bread and cup can allow us to feel the power of God’s love in Christ.

How have you experienced Jesus’ healing touch?

*Lord Jesus, may your healing power flow into us as we remember the Incarnation.*
Thursday, December 15

Recognizing God’s glory

*Isaiah 40:5*

Once my family was traveling by car at night. My husband was driving and dropped something. He took his eyes off the road for a moment to pick it up. Just then, my daughters and I saw a deer in the headlights.

“Dad!” they cried as the deer safely sprinted out of the way.

My husband looked up and asked, What? He didn’t see the deer. So we told him what we had seen.

The gift of a community of faith is that together we can see God’s glory revealed in different ways and at different times. We can point and say, “Look!” so that everyone can know that God is at work in the world.

Have you ever pointed out God’s glory to someone?

*God, thank you for showing us your glory. May we point it out to one another.*

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Friday, December 16

Waiting for the ultimate song

*Psalm 40:3*

In high school many of my friends loved Bruce Springsteen’s “Glory Days,” convinced that things were as good as they would get. Not me. On days when nobody else was in the house, I’d get out the U2 album. Bono and I would sing our hearts out to the plants. I’d belt, “I will sing a new song,” the refrain of a song based on Psalm 40. Singing that song was an act of hope. Surely things would get better!

During Advent, we can hear a few notes of God’s song, the promised future filled with hope, peace, joy, and love. God has assured us that we as a people and as a planet have a future in Jesus Christ. A new song is being written. Someday we will sing it together.

What song gives you hope when you hear it?

*Lord, we give thanks for the songs of hope that sustain us.*

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Saturday, December 17

Fear and faith

*Luke 2:9*

The first time I went door-to-door evangelizing, I was nervous. I had decided to invite some kids from a subsidized housing plan to participate in VBS and had asked a church acquaintance who lived there to help me organize it. We were going to talk to strangers and invite them to church.

On the way, I prayed.

“This is all you, God, because I don’t know what I’m doing.”

The shepherds in the field were terrified when they saw the glory of the Lord shining around them. Anytime God calls us to something new, a little bit of fear is involved. But when we remember God’s promises to us, we find the courage to step out in faith.

Do you remember a time when God invited you to try something new? How did you feel?

*God of new things, thank you for accompanying us on your grand adventures. Grant us courage to participate in your mission.*
Sunday, December 18

A time for forgiveness

Matthew 1:1

The Gospel of Matthew opens with the remembrance of Jesus’ lineage. In it we discover that some of Jesus’ relatives were far from perfect. Some were prostitutes, others were adulterers, and still others were powerful kings.

We all have people in our past or in our families who are less than perfect, people we might not want to be around. But Christmas challenges us to find a way to make peace and to offer forgiveness. We remember that God does not disown us because of our mistakes. Instead, God walked among us to restore us to right relationship and to show us a new way to live.

Who or what in your past do you need to forgive?

Christ, we know you understand imperfect past and imperfect people. You choose to love us anyway. For this we are grateful.
**Monday, December 19**

**‘Proper’ vs. righteous**  
*Matthew 1:19*

How often we are tempted to dismiss things quietly! Got a problem? Just sweep it under the rug and pretend it didn’t happen so we can still look good in public. God doesn’t let Joseph do this. He’s told to risk his reputation and marry the mysteriously pregnant Mary. There was likely much whispering around town as Joseph followed God’s command.

Joseph challenges our idea of what it means to be a righteous man. Does being righteous mean we unobtrusively follow rules and traditions that have shaped our past, or do we follow God into a new future? It’s a perplexing problem when the two don’t seem to agree!

What things do you like to keep quiet so you look good in public? How might God be challenging you to break from tradition this Advent season?

*God, you call us to do the things that are both right and righteous. Help us to discover those things in our lives.*

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**Tuesday, December 20**

**Words to treasure**  
*Luke 2:19*

The angels tell the shepherds that Jesus is the Messiah. The shepherds then go to see the baby and relay to Mary the good news about her son. Mary treasures and ponders all their words in her heart. She asks:

How can this be?

What does this mean?

Why has God chosen me?

Advent is a time when we remember and reflect upon the incredible story of the Incarnation. We trust that God has chosen each of us. We remember that each of us is carrying part of God’s story in our own hearts.

Which of God’s words do you treasure and ponder?

*Lord, thank you for choosing us. May we always ponder what this means for our lives.*

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**Wednesday, December 21**

**Grace and gifts**  
*Matthew 2:11*

The local prison has a program to provide gifts for the children of incarcerated parents. Volunteers aren’t guided by stars but by GPS to deliver gifts to the homes of strangers. I once went to a home with presents in a large bag with a Santa on it. The man answering the door said they were Jehovah’s Witnesses. They didn’t celebrate Christmas!

As I fumbled an apology, the man put me at ease by saying he wouldn’t deny the children gifts offered in love and invited me in. We prayed together. It’s easy to criticize the commercialism of Christmas, but sometimes our gifts are a vehicle of grace, a brightly wrapped way of connecting people who might never cross paths otherwise.

Do you remember giving unexpectedly or receiving from an unexpected source?

*God of all, may our gifts be an extension of your love and grace.*
Thursday, December 22

Light of the world
Psalm 18:28

The sanctuary is an extraordinary space on Christmas Eve. Just as the place of Jesus’ birth was transformed by the Christ child, many of our dark sanctuaries are made close and intimate with the presence of candles. Worshiping by candlelight makes everything feel softer and gentler.

For me, the Christmas Eve service all points to that one special moment where we sing “Silent Night, Holy Night” by candlelight as we remember the hope and peace that Jesus brings to the world. No sermon can match the feeling of the community singing together as we hold on to the light of hope for the world. Words can’t capture the power of light to dispel darkness, but a room full of candles can illuminate the promise that the darkness will not prevail.

What places need God’s light to transform them?

God of light, shine brightly into the dark corners of our lives and our world.

Friday, December 23

Faith and feelings
Matthew 2:10

The poet May Angelou said, “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” The Magi who were searching for the newborn king likely remembered the joy they felt when they finally found him.

This is the beauty of Advent and Christmas. It’s a time when we shape our lives around sharing feelings of joy and hope. We intentionally chase the light of Christ’s star in the darkness so that we can remember with confidence the love of Jesus. We light the Advent candles and call forth the feelings of hope, peace, joy, and love, remembering that they all dwell richly in Christ.

What is special about the way you feel during Advent? Christmas?

God of joy, overwhelm us with your presence and guide us with your light.

Saturday, December 24

Inspirational faith
Matthew 9:2

It was an ordinary Christmas Eve and I must have been about 13 years old. The candles were lit in the sanctuary. The choir was singing and the preacher was preparing to give his sermon.

I fidgeted a bit as I watched him in prayer. I just knew that he was talking with God in the stillness. He was attending to something beyond. At that moment I saw his faith—naked, needing, and raw. And in the next moment I wanted it for myself. I wanted to be as close to God as he appeared to be. My own faith journey began that night.

Can you remember a time when someone else’s faith inspired you?

Jesus, we remember that we are not alone in our faith. Inspire us to witness to you even in our unguarded, needy moments.
Christmas Day

Sunday, December 25

Remembering God’s great gift

*Revelation 21:3*

“Ready or not, here I come!” Those words put an end to the frantic search for a hiding space in the children’s game hide-and-seek. The hiders quickly slip out of sight and sit quietly as they wait to be found.

Christmas Day comes, ready or not. The frantic running around comes to an end. The stores’ lights are off and their doors are locked. People slip into their homes and into their churches to celebrate the holy day. Sights, sounds, and smells blend together as we remember the gift of the Christ child. New memories are made as we taste a hint of God’s banquet and hear strains of God’s new song. We look back and remember the promises. We look forward to the day when Christ will come again, and we celebrate God’s love together.

Merry Christmas!

*God of celebration, may our holiday be a holy day,*

*reflecting the love born into the world through Christ.*