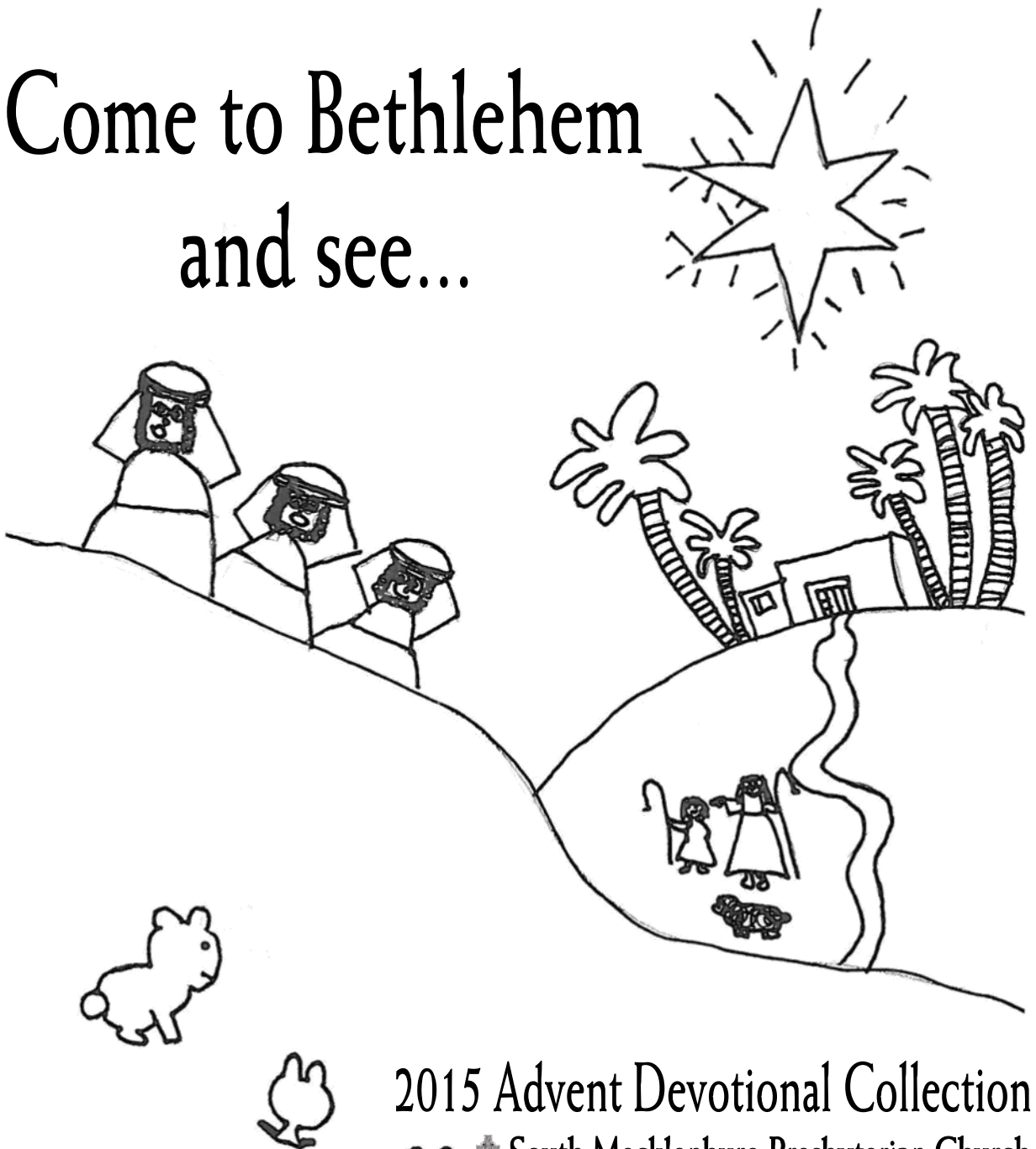


Come to Bethlehem and see...



2015 Advent Devotional Collection
✠ South Mecklenburg Presbyterian Church

Advent Devotionals



“... but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” Isaiah 40:31

We invite you to enter into the season of Advent by experiencing the 11th annual South Mecklenburg Presbyterian Church Advent Devotional Collection. We cannot promise that you won't grow weary this hectic season, but our hope is that through the daily spiritual practices of scripture reading, reflection and prayer your strength will be renewed.

Each day from the first Sunday in Advent through Christmas Day, our daily Advent guide features a personal, heart-felt story told and illustrated by our SMPC family. As you journey through Advent, we encourage you to read the stories as a family or curl up on the couch for quiet time. However you choose to experience this special SMPC tradition, we hope you will be inspired as you wait in hope for the birth of our Lord.

If you or someone you know is approaching the Advent season with a heavy heart, please join us on December 15, 7:00 p.m. in the Sanctuary for our *Longest Night* service.

The 2015 South Mecklenburg Presbyterian Church Advent Devotional Collection is available in booklet form (one per family, please) and online at www.SMPCHome.org. Please feel free to share this collection with your family, neighbors, and friends.

If you find this devotional offering particularly meaningful, and would like to share your own Christmas memory for next year's Advent Devotional Collection, please notify Terry Gaines, terryg@carolina.rr.com.

First Sunday of Advent, November 29, 2015

**For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.**

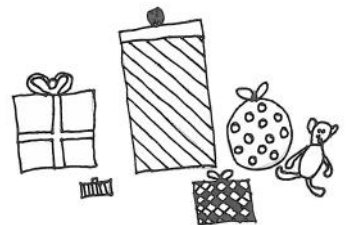
Isaiah 9:6

Christmas is a season of giving and receiving. Looking for a gift to give can be a pleasure or a pain. Receiving a gift can be a delight or a disappointment. Sometimes a gift can leave you perplexed. I've received some generous, thoughtful gifts I didn't quite know what to do with. There was a whole country ham that scarcely fit into my limited kitchen space and not at all into my meal plans. There was a flat thing that said "iPad" that took me a long time to understand enough to become addicted to. There was a lovingly hand-knit, coral-colored skirt and sweater that made me look vaguely like an Easter egg. And, for a few years, there were very expensive tree ornaments so large and dramatic that they overwhelmed any branch of the Christmas tree where I tried to hang them.

Christmas is a season for thinking about God's gift. "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given." What a loving, thoughtful, extravagant gift! Sometimes this gift excites me, sometimes it overwhelms me, but often it perplexes me. Can I put it aside for a more convenient time? Can I say, "thank you" and forget about it? Could I possibly accept it and discover how to use it? Maybe this year, today, I can let this wonderful gift transform me into a messenger to those who need to hear that this gift is for them, too.

Dear God, giver of all gifts, open our eyes and hearts to your generosity. We thank you for all those gifts we recognize and rejoice in. We ask your help in seeing that you offer us much, much more. In this Christmas season may we accept your gifts and share them with others. Amen.

Dotty Dysard



Abby Lebda, Age 12

Monday, November 30, 2015



I have showed you all things, how that so laboring you ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” Acts 20:35

It was Christmastime and my brother David was a cook at a local restaurant. He told me that one of the waitresses had just become a single mom. She had a teenage daughter that loved Christmas. Due to the loss of the extra income, she couldn't afford to buy a Christmas tree, dinner or presents. She was doing well to exist. She was heartbroken that she was going to have to tell her daughter that she couldn't afford Christmas that year.

When we were younger, my Dad would take us out into the woods every year and cut a cedar tree for our Christmas tree. So David and I decided to go out into the woods and get a tree for the waitress. It took us about 30 minutes to find the perfect one. We delivered it to her house and you would have thought we had given her gold. She had tears in her eyes and was so very appreciative.

David told me the restaurant staff had gotten together to buy her everything for dinner and had money left over to buy her daughter some presents. They wanted this year to be special for them since they'd had such a hard time.

I can't tell you what I got for Christmas that year, but I can tell you this is a memory I will always cherish. It was probably the last time my brother and I had quality time and did something special together before becoming “adults.”

Dear Lord, please show us where we might lighten the load or brighten someone's day as we go about our day. Remind us that it is when we give of ourselves that we truly give. Amen.

Melinda Harmon



Logan Graham, Age 11

Tuesday, December 1, 2015

The king will reply, “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.” Matthew 25:40

Over the course of time traditions change. This has been evident in my family especially at Christmas. A number of years ago when my children were grown, married, had children of their own, and had filled their houses with “stuff,” looking for that perfect gift had become a burden. Our solution was to give alternative gifts (grandchildren excluded) to honor each other. The first year Donna wrote Don and me a sweet, lovable poem to inform us that she had purchased a pig through Heifer International in our honor. We thought that was funny and wonderful. Did you know that one healthy sow can provide up to 16 piglets a year? Donna’s gift made a family, and possibly an entire village, rich by their standards.

Since then we have given to a number of different projects: Operation Smile; Hospice of the Piedmont; Cancer; Haiti; and Medical Teams International.

It gives me a warm, fuzzy feeling to think it’s possible we may have helped save a child from a lifetime of disfigurement, provided medication or equipment for a terminally ill patient, helped with cancer research, fed a family, etc.

This change in our tradition has impacted me in very tangible ways. It has reduced stress and saved time for things I enjoy more than shopping. I no longer have to fight mobs of people at a mall or endure traffic jams.

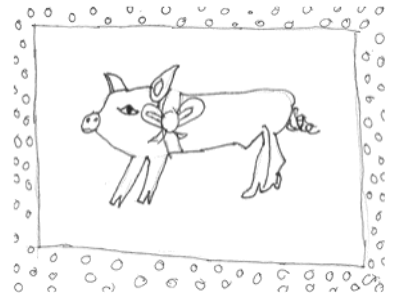
The biggest change has been my desire to celebrate the true meaning of Christmas. Christ came into the world to teach us how to live. He has plainly told us that whatever we do for other people we are in fact doing for Him. Could it be that we have found the “perfect gift,” one that will enrich the lives of people in need and also honor our loving Lord?

Loving Father, make it my desire to serve other people, for by doing so I know I am serving you. Amen.

Dot Elliott

Donna Brown’s mother

If you would like to give life-giving gifts this year that spread the love of Christ, SMPC’s Alternative Gift Market begins on Sunday, December 6.



Sarah Graham, Age 8

Wednesday, December 2, 2015



Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Ephesians 5:19-20

Hearing the first Christmas carol come on the radio (in November I might add), always sends a twinge of excitement down my spine. I can't wait for the twinkling lights around the city, the wreaths on every door, and the smell of evergreen and cinnamon filling my house. However, these symbols of Christmas aren't the things I am really looking forward to when I come home from college. What means the most to me at Christmas is family.

Every year since I can remember, my entire family gathers together for the Christmas season. Christmas Eve at the grandparents, brunch at the Aunt and Uncle's, and Christmas dinner at my house, but my favorite tradition of all is the candlelight Christmas Eve service at church. It allows me to not only spend Christmas with my immediate family, but with my church family as well. This tradition has become even more meaningful to me since I left for college. Christmas is one of the few times I am able to come home from school, making it one of the few times I get to visit my SMPC family. I love walking through the front doors and being hugged by families I haven't seen in months, but have known for years. It warms my heart knowing that spending Christmas Eve with a candle in my hand, singing "Silent Night", and celebrating the birth of our Savior with loved ones, will be a tradition I can cherish and carry on for years to come.

Dear Heavenly Father, we thank you for this season of love and family. May we be shining examples of that love to others. Amen.

Natalie Rawls, Virginia Tech senior



Jeffrey Webb, Age 11

Thursday, December 3, 2015

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

I grew up in a small church in Summerville, SC, and one of our long-standing traditions was a living nativity that the youth were responsible for doing.

There was one particular Christmas Eve nativity enactment that has become family legend. I was Mary that year, already in the stable holding the Son of God, who was getting on in years at this point, and as many mothers do, I was adjusting his blankets to make sure he was protected against the cold evening air. You can imagine my surprise when baby Jesus' head rolled right off of his body and landed at the feet of one of the angels.

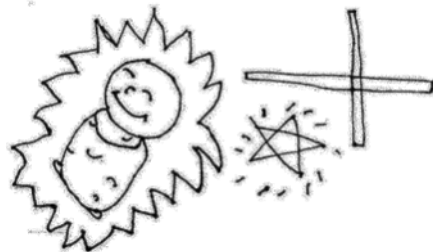
To say that I was horrified would be an understatement, but my shock and embarrassment were quickly interrupted by laughter, first from Joseph, but then spreading to the shepherds, sheep, wise men, angels, and finally the audience gathered on the sidewalk. The narrator, inside the sanctuary and oblivious to the pandemonium outside, continued on with the story, and during the next song, we were able to reunite the Messiah's head and his body, as well as regain our composure.

It wasn't until more than a decade later, when I was a new mother myself, that I began to think about how those feelings of nervousness and inadequacy might have been fairly accurate reflections of reality for Mary. I can imagine her wondering if she was holding him properly, if he was getting adequate nourishment, if she was really worthy of this task placed before her.

And I thought too, of how we can be grace for one another, how we can laugh together, and encourage each other, how we are that little sixth grade angel for one another, who carefully picked up the baby's head and returned it to me with a grin.

God, our creator and sustainer, help us remember that with you, we are enough. Make us able to move past our mistakes, to give grace to one another, and to remember that laughter is a gift from you. Amen.

Rebecca Guzman
Director of Spiritual Formation



Samantha Snyder, Age 7

Friday, December 4, 2015



May the God of hope fill you with joy and peace in believing so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. Romans 15:13

Sixty-one years ago on November 16, 1954, Perry Como recorded what would become one of the all-time favorites of the Christmas season: (There's No Place Like) "Home for the Holidays." You may have already heard it played this year.

Each time I hear it, I get that "warm and fuzzy" feeling inside me. Just can't help myself.

Interesting to me is that of the 85 Christmases the Lord has allowed me to "be home for the holidays," only one---yes just one---was not with family. In the fall of 1953, I took a leave from graduate school studies and enlisted in the army. Of course no one was allowed home during basic training. Bummer.

On Christmas Day, 1953, after attending church on the base at Fort Jackson, my buddies and I got in the chow line and waited our turn for an outstanding Christmas Day meal: turkey with all....and I mean all...the fixins.

But it wasn't "home."

How fortunate that most of us are able to spend the Christmas holidays with family at home. The aroma of sticky buns--- a hot cup of coffee---and gathering around the tree to open presents.

Now, as I am about to celebrate my 86th Christmas, our daughters and their families have assumed the task of Christmas Day activities. After arising, Dixie and I will read the Christmas Day devotional and head over to daughter Laurel's abode for another family Christmas.

And yes, sometime during the day, we will listen to Perry singing "Oh There's No Place Like Home For The Holidays." Can't beat that!

Gracious Heavenly Father, we thank you for this opportunity to gather as a family and celebrate the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

David Lindquist



Alec White, Age 7

Saturday, December 5, 2015



**For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.
Luke 2:11**

Jan Brett's book "The Night Before Christmas" makes no reference to our Savior's birth, but it has wiggled itself into an important part of my family's Christmas Eve tradition.

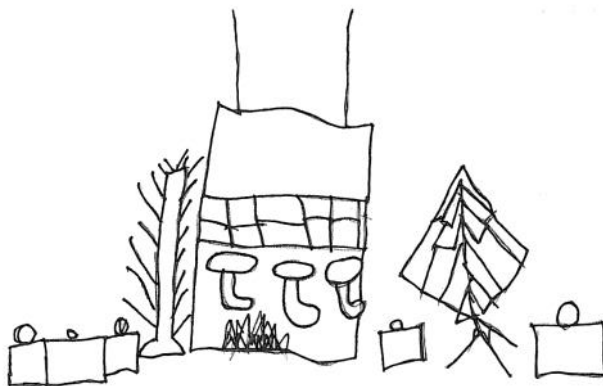
My oldest brother was given this book by his preschool teacher when we lived in Greensboro. He could not even read yet. I wasn't even born yet. Yet this paperback book over the last 12 years of our living in Charlotte has crept into our family's Christmas Eve lineup of traditions.

First we merrily march off to Christmas Eve service and then return home for a meal with family and friends. After dinner, and everyone is gone, all three Haines kids put on their pajamas and out comes our much worn and much cherished paperback version of "The Night Before Christmas."

As my brothers leave for college one by one, the future of our Christmas Eve traditions may change. It is this special time of taking turns reading this book page by page, by the glow of the fire in the fireplace and lights from the tree that will always remain in my memories and my heart. Reading this book reminds me of how much I love spending time with my family.

Dear Lord, I know this time of year we tend to get caught up in planning parties and gift giving and forget the WHY of why we are doing these things. Please help us to keep our eyes on the reason and on the night before Christmas to remember that YOU are our WHY! May our special time with family and loved ones warm our hearts. In your name we pray. Amen.

Julia Caroline Haines, 8th Grade



Parker Graham, Age 7

Second Sunday of Advent, December 6, 2015



In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." Luke 2:26-30

"Don't be afraid Mary." Don't be afraid! Seriously!! A luminous face is staring down at you in the middle of the night, rousing you from a deep and peaceful slumber and says, "Hi, don't be alarmed. God is with you." And that is supposed to make her feel better?

As I watch the news and listen to politicians and even observe the plethora of zombie apocalypses on TV, fear seems to be the going commodity. I conjecture that everyone is afraid, more than we even allow ourselves to know. We are afraid of failing, in our jobs, as parents, as spouses, of not measuring up, of illness and random acts of violence. We do everything in our power to be in control of our lives, to be purpose driven and in charge of our destinies. But, fear limits us, constricts us, causes us to live small. The Hebrew word for Egypt can be translated constricted or small. The invitation to the Hebrew people was to enter the spaciousness of God's grace and freedom.

Right now I stand on the threshold of a new adventure, coming to be in ministry with you, the people of South Mecklenburg Presbyterian Church. I am surrounded by boxes and filled with a mixture of fear and excitement. Leaving the familiar, even for a wonderful thing, is scary business.

To have faith is not to have all the answers or engage in wishful thinking, but to walk in trust that God is in this place and time; to trust that God's favor is upon us, which is to say, God is for us. God is in the business of conceiving the inconceivable. The largeness of this truth is revealed in a small infant that enters this world to say that God's love is larger than all we can imagine. The invitation to all of us is to say "yes" to being image bearers of this inconceivable truth and allow God's love to be born in us. Be not afraid. Seriously.

**Help me Lord to fling wide the portals of
my heart to receive your word and let it
be born anew in me. Amen.**

**Cynthia Williams
Associate Pastor**



Emery Hicks, Age 5

Monday, December 7, 2015



Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.” Matthew 2: 1-2

Jayne, my dear friend and neighbor, decided to move back to Boston. It's where her dad and brothers lived. They would give her the support she needed to raise her two children since her husband filed for divorce. She was still grieving her mother's death, so the divorce was another painful blow in a wound that hadn't healed.

But, she was looking for a fresh start. We packed up all of their belongings and the moving truck carried them away on a very hot summer day.

She had carefully packed the Christmas cactus that her mom had given her before she died, something still living that had been in her mother's home. As she unpacked the boxes, the Christmas cactus wasn't in any of them. She figured it had fallen out somehow, somewhere in the move.

Even though it was just a plant, it had also been a memory. She found herself crying again. Days turned into weeks and the holidays were approaching, and the tears fell less often. Life was moving along as they looked to establish new traditions in their family minus one.

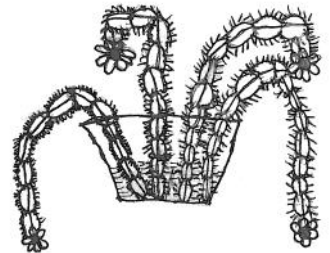
Jayne went through the boxes of Christmas decorations that she had not previously unpacked. A sprig of the Christmas cactus had fallen into one of the boxes and had miraculously survived. Being a cactus, it didn't need much water, but it hadn't had any sun.

She quickly planted and watered the sprig, placing it in the sun. Eventually the sprig began to grow until it was a beautiful plant again.

Sometimes in the darkest hour, a light begins to shine. And broken pieces become whole again.

Dear God, Thank you for family that sticks together after being pulled apart; and for traditions old and new. Thank you for friendships that endure miles of distance. And thank you for tiny Christmas miracles that appear when you need them most. Amen.

Kim Becknell Williams



Addison Hicks, Age 9

Tuesday, December 8, 2015

Step out of the traffic! Take a long, loving look at me, your High God, above politics, above everything. Psalm 46:10 (The Message)

I have always loved the book *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* by Dr. Seuss. My favorite line is, "Maybe Christmas, he thought, doesn't come from a store. Maybe Christmas...perhaps... means a little bit more!" This sentiment has never been more apparent to me than it was in December of 2006.

Our family was in a period of transition. Collin had accepted a new position; therefore, we were in the process of moving from Richmond, Virginia to Charlotte. Our house in Richmond sold very quickly. A blessing, but since we were not closing on our home in Charlotte until December 22, we spent five weeks in a temporary furnished apartment. Practically everything that we owned went into storage. We could only pack a couple of suitcases of clothes and a few toys and books for Julianne and Caroline, who were six and three at the time.

Since we would be closing on our new house on December 22 then driving to Tennessee to spend Christmas with Collin's parents, we decided not to put up a Christmas tree. All of our decorations were in storage and we would be moving out of the apartment before Christmas.

At first, it was difficult for me to accept not having a Christmas tree. Our children were young and I wanted to continue the traditions we had begun to establish. However, we attended an Advent wreath workshop at our church where families could make an Advent wreath with fresh greens. We left that evening with a beautiful Advent wreath and a guide for family devotions. That Advent wreath became the center of our temporary home. It was soon decorated with ornaments that the girls had made at school. We enjoyed lighting the candles each week and sharing family devotions.

The last thing anyone who is in the process of moving wants is more stuff. Apart from a few things for the girls, other gifts were forgone. Time that I would have spent shopping was instead spent with family. And like the Grinch who discovered that Christmas came without decorations and gifts, I realized the blessing of observing Advent simply.

Heavenly Father, as we move through the season of Advent, please help me shift my focus from decorating and shopping to prayer and worship. Allow me the opportunity to slow down and prepare my heart for the coming of Jesus, our Savior. Amen.



Wendy Sinclair

Shay Soderlund, Age 8

Wednesday, December 9, 2015



**Train up a child in the way he should go, And when he is old, he will not depart from it.
Proverbs 22:6**

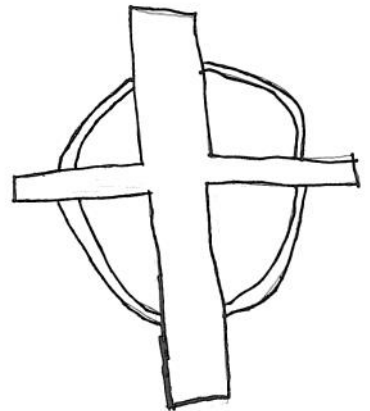
As a child, Christmas was the best time of the year! Having a large family meant laughter, loud voices, and lots of presents. But, what I remember the most is the Bible stories of Christ and his gift to the world my Sunday School teacher would tell.

It wasn't until years later, I realized the true meaning and importance of those stories. Then when I became a Dad, I started passing down these lessons to my children, this did not fall on deaf ears. I've had the privilege to see them grow in their faith, be charitable, attend services, even surprise me by knowing some scripture by heart. This is the grace of our Lord.

Today, as a new grandfather, I look forward to teaching my granddaughter the true stories of Christ and HIS Love, and to see her walk with Christ in her faith.

Father, thank you for another glorious day with you, and for those who taught us to follow in your ways. Please give us the strength and wisdom to teach others the same. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Casey Nolan



Will Hendrix, Age 10

Thursday, December 10, 2015



They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share.

1 Timothy 6:18

A Christmas tradition I enjoy is the gift of giving. Just as the wise men gave gifts to Jesus, we give gifts to those we care about. This is a memory I hold very dear.

It was a snowy 1948 Christmas in Roanoke, Virginia, and I was seven years old. At my house, the one gift I remember from that year was my mother opening a pair of spiked, suede, fur-topped boots. She was beyond excited and she looked beautiful. My father was so proud to give them to her.

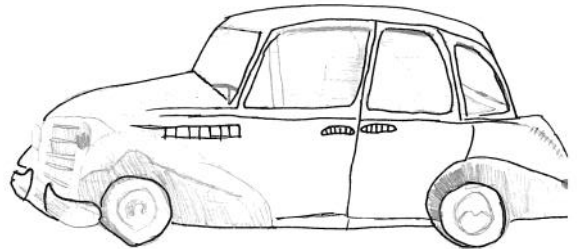
Around 11:00 a.m., after my family finished exchanging gifts at our house, we piled into the car and drove on slippery roads to the parsonage to surprise the minister of our church. The congregation, made up of very hardworking men and women, gathered quietly in front of the house.

Someone knocked on the door and the minister came out. A church elder gave him a piece of long white string that he was to follow. The minister had such a puzzled look on his face. So, in the snow, around the house, up the sidewalk, across the street he wound the white string into a ball. It was a sight to behold to see our minister tromping in the snow with the congregation following as he made his way back to the parsonage.

There in the driveway sat a beautiful brand new black car. It was a moment I have never forgotten. It was a time when money was scarce and we did not have many worldly possessions. This memory makes me realize how blessed I was to be raised in such a loving, unselfish church.

**Thank you God for these wonderful memories
of caring people's generous gifts. Amen.**

Joyce Highsmith



Kyle Royster, Age 10

Friday, December 11, 2015



And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” Luke 2:13-14

“Silent Night” is one of if not the most beloved Christmas carols, holding a significance for millions across the globe. I would like to share what it means for me, as it seems to be a family theme.

I never knew my grandfather, but my mother told me “Silent Night” was not only his favorite carol but also the only thing that brought him to tears. She later told me that when my aunt was a young woman she had the honor of being the angel on top of the singing Christmas tree, which was as much of a Charlotte tradition as *The Nutcracker* and *A Christmas Carol*. Every year for the finale the lights are dimmed until all you can see are twinkling white lights on the tree against a blue black sky, and the chorus sings “Silent Night” a cappella. There is not a dry eye in the house.

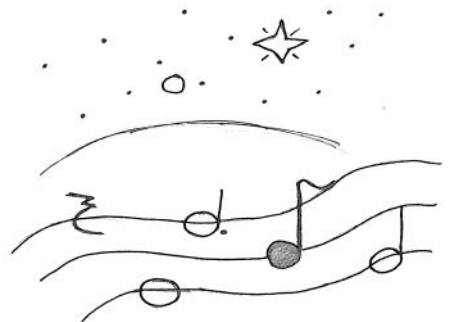
Then eight years ago my dad died after Thanksgiving so my mom stayed with us through the holidays. One evening she came out of her room asking me where that beautiful music was coming from. She was hearing a harmonious choir singing “Silent Night” repeatedly. But there was no music. I told her I believed it was the heavenly host to comfort her that daddy was at peace.

A few years later mom was in the hospital and the time came to let her go. As she was taken off the IV I downloaded “Silent Night” to serenade her into the arms of Jesus. She was also now at peace.

On a personal note, my silent night is on Christmas Eve when family and friends go home after a traditional holiday meal, bellies full of turkey and hearts full of love. All is calm as I sit in the stillness and warmth of the fire, and all is bright as I gaze at the lights on the tree with an angel on top. Yes, that time for me is certainly a silent night, but more than that, it is a very holy night. He is here.

Heavenly Father, thank you for this most holy and silent night. We join the heavenly host in praising the birth of your son so that we may be saved and dwell with you forever. Amen

Carol Sammarco



Amanda Gilleland, Age 11

Saturday, December 12, 2015



**The angel said, "Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you-wonderful, joyous news for all people. Your savior is born today in David's city. He is Christ the Lord."
Luke 2:10-11**

Christmas has always been a special time in our household. It was a gathering of family and friends sharing presents and time together. On Christmas morning no one was allowed to go downstairs to begin opening presents until all were up and we went downstairs together. Presents were handed out and opened one at a time. In this way, we all shared in the excitement as each opened their present and it made the excitement last a little longer. Brian would put a stone or two into the presents he wrapped so that they would rattle and one wasn't quite sure what was in the box.

As time went by, we began to realize just how special Christmas had been when on one occasion, while visiting friends in Raleigh, our son Brian came over from NC State early Saturday morning to visit. I was still in bed. He came upstairs to the bedroom, tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Dad, can we go downstairs and open the presents?"

After our daughter Alison had finished school and had her first job she would come over on Christmas Eve and spend the night with us so that she could get up on Christmas morning and once again experience that special time together.

**Heavenly Father, help us to be ever mindful
of the true meaning of Christmas. Amen.**

Rodney Young



Lilly McAnally, Age 8

Third Sunday of Advent, December 13, 2015

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him and he will make your paths straight. Proverbs 3:5-6

I have often pondered that verse, wondering what it takes to trust God implicitly and what that kind of trust would look like. Recently, I had an encounter that seemed to answer my question, even as the memory keeps me smiling.

I was waiting to have a prescription filled in a pharmacy. I sat on a chair in the waiting area. Next to me were two empty chairs, but in the third chair sat a little girl of kindergarten age. She had an oversized magazine on her lap, so large that it literally hung over the side of her lap.

Casually, this little lady turned to me and whispered slyly, "Do you talk to strangers?" I replied, "No, do you?" She immediately responded emphatically, "No!" I followed up with, "Who told you not to?" "My Mommy," she instantly replied. I then asked, "What are you reading?" On seeing the puzzled look on her face, I slowly spelled out and pronounced the word COSMOPOLITAN. With a bemused look, and an element of surprise in her voice, she responded, "Oh! You can read!"

As humorous as I found this unexpected meeting, I was led to ask myself what kind of trust would make this innocent child strike up a pleasant conversation with a total stranger—particularly after being forewarned by her mommy not to do so? Perhaps it was the fact that I reminded her of a doting grandparent; or perhaps my years of teaching elementary education has left a permanently identifiable warmth that still resonates with the little ones I come across; or perhaps it was the knowledge, that even though she was disobeying her mommy, her mommy would protect her if necessary. And so it struck me, even though I may not be perfect or always do what I'm supposed to, God will protect me, no matter what. And with that reminder, I continue to search for the trust that is childlike and never failing.

Lord, may the message of this Advent season continue to remind us of the faith, trust, and promise that is available to all God's children. By trusting God, may we enable His purposes to be realized in our lives. Amen.

Hilreth Dyce



Brooke Hicks, Age 9

Monday, December 14, 2015



For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me. Matthew 25:35

Christmas is all about presence. Not the presents that you get on Christmas morning, but the presence of family, friends, and God.

One Friday near Christmas, I was working at a Loaves and Fishes food pantry in Charlotte. A man walked in who had never been to the pantry before. He knew he was getting food, but he didn't know that we were giving him a whole week's worth of food. After the volunteers walked through the pantry with the man and gave him his food, he was astonished to see how much food he really got. All that the man brought to take the food home was a pillowcase and a bus ticket. Instead of having him take the bus, one of the men at the pantry drove him home. Having the kind and gracious people around the pantry to take people home that need help like this is such a blessing.

Christmas is all about Christ's birth and we shouldn't take advantage of it by thinking about the money, the presents, and what we can get out of it. Instead, we need to think about how we can be present to someone this Christmas – like the man who came to Loaves and Fishes. Even sharing the presence of God with one person can make a difference this season.

Dear God, I pray that my brothers and sisters this holiday season can seek out the presence in their life that they need rather than the presents we take advantage of. In order to do this we need your love and grace toward people who need it most to know you are always looking out for us. In your name we pray. Amen.

Jackson Stone, 9th Grade



Rory Killian, Age 11

Tuesday, December 15, 2015



The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Jesus Christ. Philippians 4:7

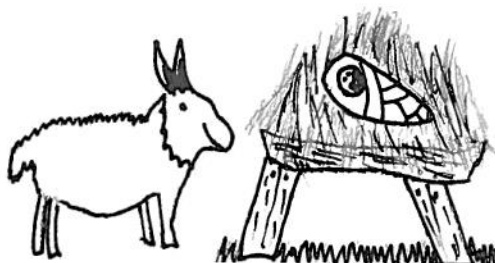
I admit I can be overly dramatic when looking to the future and my impending status as an “empty nester.” Our 21-year-old daughter Natalie is a junior in college and our son Eric is 17 and a senior in high school. The slightest things bring me to the verge of tears – and Eric takes great delight in pushing my buttons. He laughs each time I announce sadly, “this is the last (fill in the blank) of your high school career.” While I celebrate my children’s success, I confess to the occasional urge to have a toddler tantrum, stomp my foot and say, “but I don’t WANT them to go!”

I fully expect a puddle of tears this Advent season as I pull down the box containing my hand-painted, one-of-a-kind nativity scene. When the kids were around 10 and 7, Dave had the sweetest idea to take them to a pottery painting shop and create my Christmas present. I’m not sure he anticipated that they would select the entire cast of characters needed to fill the stable. For the unfamiliar, these places charge by the hour. I think it took an entire afternoon – and a tremendous amount of patience – to oversee this project. I still have a camel and a donkey that have yet to be painted; apparently Dave was drained of patience **and** money.

Neither of my children breathed a word of their creation to me so I was completely surprised on Christmas morning. I unwrapped the ceramic figurines one by one, amazed that they had kept this secret from me, and I was overwhelmed by their thoughtfulness. They took great pride explaining which piece they had painted, but because of their age difference it was pretty easy to tell.

So now, I have this beautiful reminder of the love God has for us all in sending Jesus to live among us. I will cherish the memory of how my children created this irreplaceable gift. Little did they know at ages 10 and 7 that they would forever help me prepare for my season of Advent waiting, while also eagerly awaiting their return home for Christmas.

Gracious and loving God, thank you for the precious gift of your son and for the gift of children. Thank you for sweet memories that fill us with peace and joy during this season of hope. Amen.



Terry Gaines

Nicholas White, Age 11

Wednesday, December 16, 2015



For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. Philippians 1:21

This verse is inscribed on the grave of Dr. William Hammond Bowman, my first pastor. Dr. Bowman pastored Clover Presbyterian church for decades. When my family moved to Clover in 1958, he was reaching the end of a long, illustrious career.

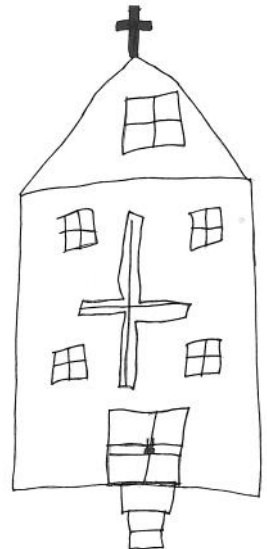
Dr. Bowman was born in 1894 and served in the navy during World War I. By the time we met, he was in his mid-60s. An amazingly vital man, Dr. Bowman prepared sermons for Sunday mornings, Sunday evenings, and Wednesday evening services. As if this were not enough, he also visited the sick and taught the Bible at "junior league," an elementary school fellowship group.

Dr. Bowman made the Christmas story come to life. His words were so descriptive that our minds traveled with Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. We felt like we were in the stable with the shepherds as they saw our newborn savior.

Dr. Bowman was nearly 70 when he retired. He left the earth in 1975 at the age of 80. As a legacy, he cultivated three generations of committed Christians, who learned to love God and man through his teaching and example. If God allows, I hope to see him later, so I can thank him again.

Father, we thank you for people like Dr. Bowman who have been our spiritual mentors. As we age, allow us to be examples and teachers for others, so we may share the wisdom and love of Christ. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Tom Strohl



Katherine Webb, Age 8

Thursday, December 17, 2015



Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. 1 Peter 4: 8-9

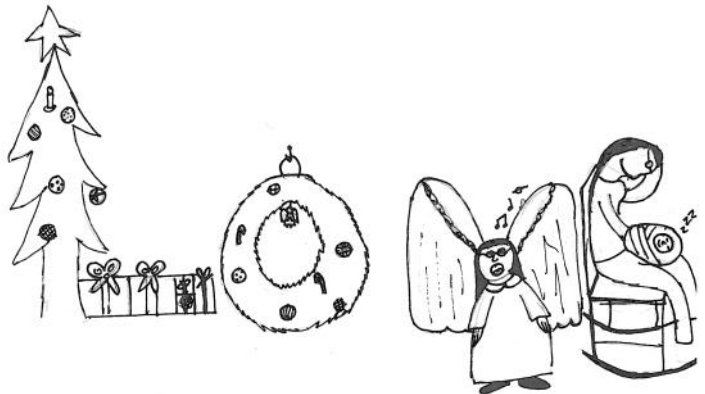
I have three sisters. Growing up, Christmas was a BIG holiday at our house. As we each married and started our own families, we held on to the tradition of giving everyone gifts at Christmas. As the family grew so did the length of our shopping lists. Eventually, we decided to switch over to drawing names for gifts among the sisters and our husbands. It was easier, and less expensive, but somehow it didn't feel very personal. So we asked ourselves, "what could we do to better honor the spirit of love that we really wanted to express to each other?"

As we thought back on the gifts in the past that had meant the most, we found they were almost always the handmade gifts that came from the heart – a special scrapbook of family memories, a handmade afghan, a handcrafted Advent calendar, or a photo collage of a special family beach trip. But those kinds of gifts weren't really practical to do every year, especially now that we each had jobs and families of our own. So, we decided we would each do a small "gift from the heart" for each other.

As it has turned out, a "gift from the heart" is usually a "gift for the stomach." One sister makes us each a box of chocolate caramels from an old family recipe. I make cheese wafers. Another sister gives a homemade cheese ball and store-bought crackers. And the other sister usually shares an assortment of her incredible homemade Christmas cookies.

Through the year, we try to stay in touch and get along, but we aren't perfect. We bicker sometimes and often don't call each other as frequently as we should. But we do love each other, and love covers a multitude of sins, especially at Christmastime.

Lord, as we gather with friends and family this Christmas, help us to reflect your unconditional and unfailing love for us, by loving one another deeply, putting aside differences and disagreements. Help us to offer hospitality freely, and to accept it graciously, so that our love for one another may bring you joy. Amen.



Karolyn Hudson

Amanda Gilleland, Age 11

Friday, December 18, 2015



For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. Psalm 62:1

I love Christmas and everything about it – the sights, the sounds, smells and especially the music. My family makes fun of me because I begin listening to Christmas music at the beginning of November.

During my childhood, my family would attend the 11 p.m. Christmas Eve service. I remember how quiet and peaceful it was going to church so late at night. At the end of the service, the choir would recess while singing “Silent Night.” It was officially Christmas once the hymn ended as we exited the church at midnight in the quiet darkness.

After I was married with children, we began our own traditions. Following Christmas Eve service each year, the girls would be brimming with excitement. Trying to fill the hours before bedtime we would drive around and look at Christmas lights. It was peaceful and quiet as we listened to “Silent Night” and other carols in the car.

Years later, my two sisters and our families went to celebrate our parents’ 57th wedding anniversary with them. It fell on a Sunday that year and we attended their church. My mom had been living with Alzheimer’s for several years. She didn’t recognize us anymore, but as I sat beside her in church, she happily sang all the verses of “Silent Night” without any assistance from me or the hymnal. It brought tears to my eyes to see the joy on her face as she sang.

This year as my family and I gather for worship on Christmas Eve, I will eagerly await the lighting of the candles and singing “Silent Night.” It allows me to pause and ponder the special gift of love God gave us on that silent, holy night.

**Heavenly Father, thank you for the comfort we
have in knowing that through your love, all is
calm and bright. Amen.**

Susie Deese
Terry Gaines’ sister



Katie Conerly, Age 9

Saturday, December 19, 2015

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Galatians 5:22-23

Sometimes it is easy to look at the holiday season as something that has become frivolous and materialistic. It is easy to scoff at the gifts, the presents, the shows, the movies, and any other traditions that aren't "technically" biblically based. And these are fair considerations.

But there can still be deep meaning found within these activities. Think about it this way: perhaps one of the greatest parts of the holiday season is the break it allows each of us to take. For just a brief moment, we do not have to worry as much about school, work, or anything of the sort. The newfound free time allows us to do exactly what God created us to do: come together as a community. And in that time we spend together – whether we are looking at lights or going to church – the fruits of His spirit are present.

Kindness is represented in the gifts we take the time to buy for one another.

Love is represented in the goodwill that tends to amplify during the Christmas season – serving at the homeless shelter, operation Christmas Child, the angel tree, etc.

Forbearance – patience – is illustrated in our ability to manage the random little "stressors" that come with this season. Christmas cards, buying gifts, travelling...it is not in vain. It is meaningful to those who will receive, and it is a blessing that time is taken to do it.

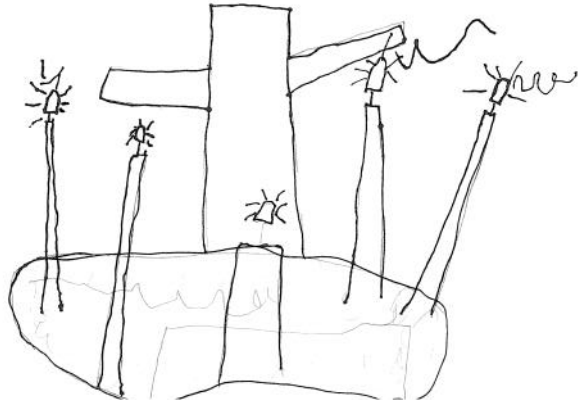
Peace is represented in the quiet moments. Unplugging from social media to take time and look at lights, go to an Advent service, or sing Christmas carols.

Faithfulness is represented practically in the traditions we uphold each year. Even a chocolate Advent calendar can be a practical illustration of daily commitment!

And finally, joy is represented through the lifted spirits that come from these community activities. Laughing at Charlie Brown's Christmas special. Singing pop Christmas music at the top of our lungs. Our Lord wants us to be joyful, and He can appear in these things.

Loving God, encourage us to look for you in every activity we do this Advent season. Remind us that Jesus Christ is our ultimate provider of all things and in all our activities. Amen.

Allie Kohler, Appalachian State senior



Jack Hendrix, Age 7

The Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 20, 2015

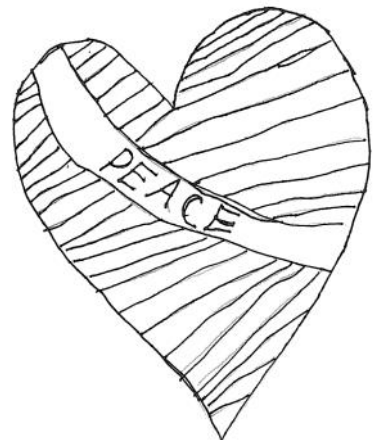


For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Jeremiah 29:11

I am a planner. It's who I am. If you were to look at my calendar, you could read exactly what I intend to do every day for the next six months. As a young adult, I scheduled my life with the same amount of precision. My home, my family, and my career were all clearly laid out in my mind. I was fortunate to be raised in a family of faith, so when faced with difficulties in life, I felt prepared to handle them with the help of God's grace and strength. What I was not prepared to handle was any alteration to *my* carefully organized agenda. What do you mean children don't always arrive when you plan them? What do you mean my husband's employer wants us to leave our home in Texas and move *all the way* to Arkansas? "I'm angry," I told God. "This was NOT what I planned." With infinite patience God listened and responded. God filled me with his loving presence and asked me to trust. God asked me to let go of my own self-centered desires and look beyond my limited viewpoint.

As it turns out, Arkansas is a lovely place. I now have three beautiful and amazing children. God continues to work in me and teach me to let go of my own will and trust in God's. God continues to teach me to look outside myself and see beyond what I want. When my husband's firm asked us to move from Arkansas to Japan, I said, "Let's go!" That was definitely not in *my* plan but I wouldn't have missed it for anything. God's plan is overflowing with beauty and experiences I could never have imagined. My life has been richer and fuller than it could ever have been if I were left in charge. I am deeply grateful that God has worked so hard to open my heart and that he continues to work in me every day. Let's face it, I'm a pretty big project. One look at my calendar will prove it.

God of our calendars, fill us with your loving presence. Open our hearts and help us to look to the future with hope. Give us peace in knowing that your plan for our world is greater than any of us can imagine and that plan begins with the birth of Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.



Melissa White

Sophia Lebda, Age 8

Monday, December 21, 2015



Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift. 2 Corinthians 9:15

All of my growing up years, Maude was in my life. She was there for my mother's family, as they were for her. All celebrations, especially weddings, she attended. Sadly, Maude passed away shortly before my wedding.

Pokey is a fond memory. He was a tall, thin man. His spirit gentle, his heart humble, so like his mother, Maude. In my earlier memories, I see him as a hardworking man, never married. My adult memory hears him, before seeing him, as he fumbled with the locks on his door. His lifelong diabetes had robbed him of his eyesight. I never knew Pokey's given name, only his last. As a child, his preacher started calling him "slowpoke," and "Pokey" stuck. I remember questioning why and was told that "Pokey was just being pokey."

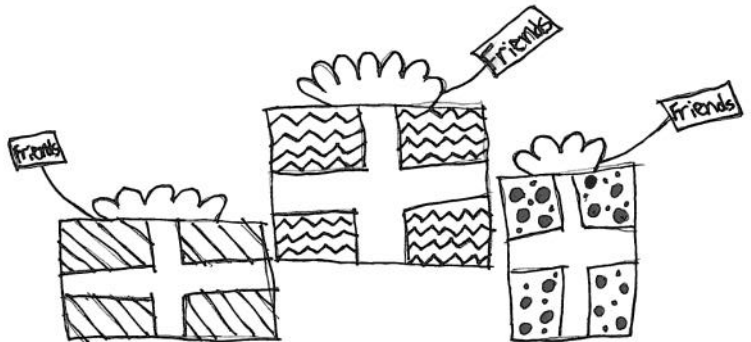
After Maude passed, my mom and her sisters began to "see after" him. When their age made this difficult, my cousin, my daughter and I assumed this role. Pokey wasn't one to ask for things, but we'd check on him throughout the year, especially at Christmas. It was part of our tradition. We'd buy groceries, wrap gifts and load the car with Christmas cheer.

Just a few days before Christmas, we called Pokey and arranged our Christmas delivery. Arriving at his door, arms laden, we knocked - repeatedly, but no answer. Then we banged, peeked in his windows, and called his phone. Nothing! Our aging moms couldn't remember knowing Pokey by any other given name. Our many calls to hospitals, nursing homes, etc. gave us no information. Our Pokey was gone from us.

We still remember, speak of and wonder about him. He knew that he and his mother were special to us. Sweet memories bring back the warmth of Pokey, his home and conversations. In this busy time of the year, I think a slow Christmas season would be especially good, better yet, a blessed pokey Christmas.

Dear God, for the gift of friendship with Pokey, I give thanks. And may the blessings of this season be given with love. Amen.

Miranda Rhodes



Chloe Davis, Age 11

Tuesday, December 22, 2015



The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way” “a voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for The Lord, make straight paths for him.” Mark 1:1-3

I grew up in a family of little faith. My father was Muslim and my mom Christian; however, neither one was devout in their religion. I would tell everyone that I was Christian because of the two faiths Christianity was the only one I was exposed to. My siblings and I would go to church with my grandmother when we would visit her.

Even though my father was raised Muslim there was something about Christmas that he loved. Personally, I think it was all the gifts that he loved receiving. He was impatient and couldn't keep a secret so every year we would open all our gifts on Christmas Eve. He would act like he hated all the mess that was left behind, but it was funny how he would be the first one in the room ripping open his gifts. Christmas Day we would either go over to my dad's best friend's house or he and his family would come to ours to exchange gifts and enjoy a big meal together. I joke when I say my dad really loved Christmas for the gifts. What I think he truly loved was having us all together.

I lost my father to cancer December 22, 2011. My mom, siblings and I still carry on with the tradition that my father started when we were young. We meet up on Christmas Eve and open our gifts. Since losing my father of course there is a sadness that Christmas brings, but I also rejoice in the fact that Christmas brings us together to laugh and show each other how much we love one another.

Jesus, you are joy even in the saddest times. Help us to praise you when we are upset or grieving. Shine joy into our hearts we pray. Amen.

Badriah Cho



Elise Ullman, Age 5

Wednesday, December 23, 2015



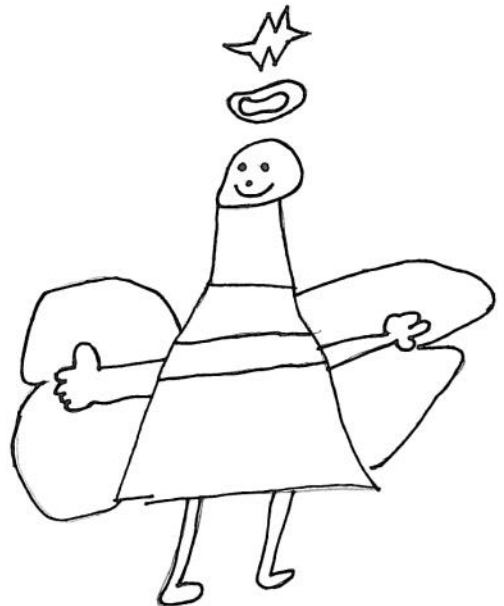
But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." Luke 1:30-33

Every Christmas Eve when I was growing up, we would go to church with my grandparents. Being a child, I don't remember much about the Christmas Eve services except the hymns and the hard, packed pews. I remember there was a lot of repetition. Every year seemed to be the same. There was comfort in the repetition, but also a beauty.

The way they ended the service was always my favorite. All of the lights would be turned out and church elders would take a single candle, lit from the Advent wreath, and light a candle at the end of each pew. Slowly everyone would share the flame until the church was filled with a beautiful, soft yellow light. That is when the choir would start to sing "Silent Night." It was always sung a cappella and as the congregation joined in, the song filled the church. You truly felt God's presence. It was like hearing "the brush of angels' wings."

Dear Lord, thank you for fellowship. Not only do we feel your presence during these times, but we also see how alike we all are, unified in your glory. As we celebrate the birth of your son, I pray that we are able to carry your spirit into the New Year and continue to allow you to use us all to serve others. It is in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Kristen Conway



Evan Williams, Age 8

Christmas Eve, Thursday, December 24, 2015



And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:24-25

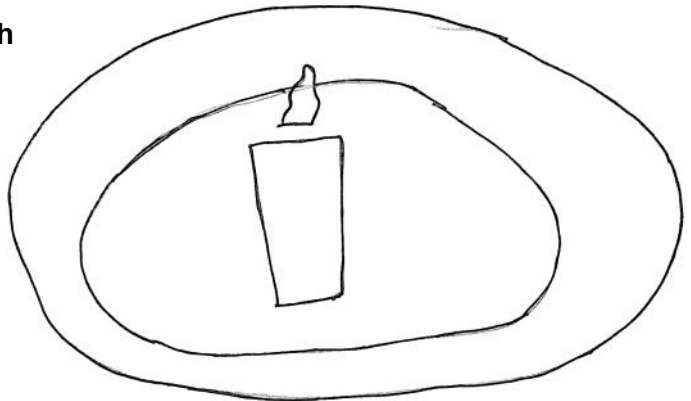
Since joining SMPC in 2000, we have not been away for very long at a time, but in the summer of 2004 we traveled to Melbourne, Australia for three months. My husband Trey had taken an assignment there in February. As soon as the kids completed year-end testing, my Mom, Lauren (age 8), Alan (age 5) and I began our 24-hour trip to join Trey in Melbourne.

We typically don't attend church on vacation, but we were living there for three months, so we visited the beautiful Presbyterian Church near our apartment. The next week we tried a smaller church a little farther away. We attended an uptown Cathedral with a beautiful organ. I felt God's presence in Australia, but not the connection of worshipping together as a body of believers. SMPC was not streaming; sermon podcasts weren't available yet; so I kept my connection to SMPC by reading sermons online.

Now in 2015 as Christmas Eve approaches, I remain so thankful for our SMPC family - the warmth of the greeters and ushers; the comfort of celebrating the Lord's Supper with my family of faith; the Chrismons on the tree; the candlelight; and, mostly, the love of Christ.

We - all of us at SMPC - are so privileged to have each other. Sometimes traveling or moving away to college or for a new job makes us more appreciative of how special the worship and fellowship are at SMPC. There is comfort in coming home. We cherish the times family is together, and for me that happens each Sunday. The people change and grow older; the baptized babies grow up and come back from college. The spirit, the presence, the encouragement and hospitality happen every time I walk through the doors. I pray it does for you, too.

So I pray, Dear Heavenly Father, be with those who travel this Christmas. Shed your traveling mercies upon them and show them the light that leads to you. Help us to be thankful for our SMPC family and friends who encourage us to work, read and study to follow your light every day of our lives. Amen



Hope Plunket

Emily Jaquith, Age 7

Christmas Day, Friday, December 25, 2015



And his name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Isaiah 9:6b

Prince of Peace. What a curious title, particularly when you consider that princes predominately are more obsessed with power than interested in peace. Of course, the same could be said of most people. Granted, we do not possess the means or artillery to amass troops at the border, but we do draft every means available to place ourselves wherever power is up for grabs. In friendship, in love, among our peers, in the workplace, at the reunion, and even during recess in the schoolyard, we prefer the position of power even if that means the sacrifice of peace.

Do you remember that childhood friend or sibling who was always working the playground? Any adjustment of a game's rules seemed to be to his or her benefit. All penalties were ruled in his or her favor. The game itself had to be his or her preference. Of course, the same dynamics are in play wherever two or more gather. The very same power plays are evident when observing the dating scene, the corporate office, the town council, the houses of Congress, the peace summit, or the military confrontation. Peace is misconstrued as the consequence of getting your way. That is not peace. That is control, and wherever control is the goal, peace is implausible. Peace involves the setting aside of the agendas, which includes your agenda, so that the common good may be sought. Peace is costly, involves sacrifice, seeks justice for all, and is never easy because power is so seductive.

The true Prince of Peace redefines power. "Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed."

Come, Lord Jesus, replace our quest for power with a passion for peace. Amen.

Matt Brown
Pastor



Grace Zagora, Age 12



Zach Jaquith, Age 11

ANGEL TREE: Bring joy to a family in need this Advent season by selecting a tag from South Mecklenburg Presbyterian Church's Angel Tree in the Sanctuary and returning your wrapped gift by December 20.

Volunteers are also needed to help deliver gifts on Christmas Eve; sign-up sheets will be available in the Narthex.

Advent Devotional Authors



We hope that you have been blessed by South Mecklenburg Presbyterian Church's daily Advent devotionals written by 27 different authors and illustrated by 28 SMPC children.

As you continue the daily spiritual practices of scripture reading, reflection and prayer, please express your gratitude to our authors and illustrators for their generous gifts.

Some interesting facts about this collection:

- * The youngest participants are five years old.
- * Our oldest participant is 86 years old.
- * There are 28 different artists, ranging in age from 5 to 12.
- * There are 27 authors – 25 from SMPC and two special friends.
- * Kim Becknell Williams is the only person who has contributed to all eleven collections and she is always the first person to turn in her submission. She often writes it in January, or at least has the idea in her head.
- * Dotty Dysard also loves to contribute and is the only person who has ever volunteered without being asked.
- * At least three of the devotionals this year mention the song “Silent Night” and its special meaning to them.
- * Included as authors this year: one middle-schooler, one high-schooler and two college students.
- * One author, Karolyn Hudson, has never spent the Advent season at SMPC. A new member, she jumped right in when asked!
- * Traditionally, clergy have not been asked to participate, but this year was an exception – an opportunity for our newest staff to tell a story and an opportunity for our church family to get to know them better.

Special thanks to Terry Gaines for inviting the authors and artists to participate and coordinating this annual tradition at South Mecklenburg Presbyterian Church.

Merry Christmas!



Desmond Killian, Age 12



South Mecklenburg Presbyterian Church

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