

Peace On Earth



2017 Advent Devotional Collection

† South Mecklenburg Presbyterian Church

Advent Wreath Candle Poems & Prayers



The Advent Wreath is a Christian tradition to mark the passage of Advent dating to the 16th century. Beginning with the First Sunday of Advent, we light the first candle. An additional candle is lit during each subsequent week until, by the last Sunday before Christmas, all four candles are lit.

There are traditionally three purple candles and one pink candle. The pink candle is lit on the 3rd Sunday of Advent, as this is the Sunday of Joy. There are various symbols used for each of the four outer candles, but the white center candle always represents the Christ and is lit on Christmas Eve.

This year, we have chosen Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love as the symbols for our candles, and we have included corresponding poems and prayers. Whether this is a new tradition for you or you have many memories of lighting the Advent wreath, we hope that the addition of these prayers will help you connect with the sacred this Advent.



Hope

hope in the bleak midwinter...hope like a seed...buried deep within the earth;
hidden...covered by layers, disappointment, struggle, pain;
buried yet stretching...,growing and becoming.
hope...like a seed...becoming new life.
we light a candle for hope.

Dear God, As we begin our Advent pilgrimage, grant us the courage to hope. Hope for your presence, Hope for your peace, Hope for your promise. Amen.



Peace

praying for peace at Christmas...peace...is the absence of conflict;
or...peace...is a spiritual connection; or better still...peace...is a way of living,
a commitment to something important;
but...peace...as a wild eyed radical...screaming its way to revolution
isn't quite the peace we had in mind...is it?
we light a candle for peace.

Dear God, As we journey down this Advent road, grant us the courage to make peace. Peace in our hearts, Peace in our homes, Peace in our communities. Amen.

Advent Wreath Candle Poems & Prayers



You will notice that we have included this year prayers to use with an Advent Wreath. If you do not have an Advent Wreath, you can pick up a kit to make your own at church.

The devotional is certainly meaningful on its own, and lighting the Advent Wreath may deepen your experience of Advent even more. You may even choose to read the Advent devotional out loud and light the candles as part of a daily or weekly household worship time.



*Rebecca Guzman
Director of Spiritual Formation*

Advent Resources Katherine Hawker www.liturgyoutside.net



Joy

joy as transformation...joy...is found in the moment...when the tables turn
and the veil of denial is lifted...displaying vulnerability and fear,
colliding with hope and promise, mingling together.
a tingle...growing warm, lurching forward...is joy.
we light a candle for joy.

Dear God, In the height of our Advent walk, grant us the courage to experience joy. Joy in the face of apathy, Joy in the face of sorrow, Joy in the face of uncertainty. Amen.



Love

love and other foolishness...love...in a young girl's song;
fearful, determined, hopeful, bursting.
love...in a mother's song;
tender, embracing, challenging, stern.
love...is God's song; curious yet timid, playful and wondering,
coming among us again.
we light a candle for love.

Dear God, As our Advent pilgrimage draws to completion, grant us the courage to share your love. Love for the unexpected challenge, Love for the vulnerable one. Love for the presence of God. Amen.

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 13th 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.

The 2017 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, December 3, 2017



While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. Luke 2:6-7

The couch itself has never been the point, even changing throughout the years—a 1970s floral, an olive-green number, or a geometric red pattern. According to Facebook, 2008 was the first year of the current unassuming beige sofa. Every Christmas Day since sometime in the '80s, Lucille's five grandchildren have been lining up on the sofa in her living room while their parents serve as the paparazzi. In 2007, we gained our first spouse, and last year in 2016 we managed to fit nine people, plus two safely tucked away in their mothers' wombs. We were missing one—an ER nurse who drew the short straw. The arms of that sofa are in for a workout come December 25, as this year we expect to have at least 12, pending engagements.

As for Lucille herself, she couldn't be more delighted. My grandma celebrated her 89th birthday this year, and she never fails to count her blessings. Mammy isn't so much a person as she is an institution, and each of us could probably write a book about what she's taught us about a life well-lived, but here's the thing I'd like to share: make room.

It's not surprising that no matter how we grow, we keep piling onto that couch. We're squished and jumbled, but Mammy taught us with her life that there's always room. Every person who comes to her home on Christmas Day has a personalized stocking and a place at the table. Anyone who declares within her earshot that they are without a place to go on Christmas is invited. If they won't come, they'll be receiving a hand-delivered plate of food.

She makes room. She says she learned it from the baby in the manger who grew up and taught us not to leave anyone out.

Inclusive God, help us to look for ways to make room this Advent season—for you, for those we love, and for those who are strangers to us. Help us to see others as you see them, as your children. Amen.

Rebecca Guzman
SMPC Director of Spiritual Formation



Clara Guzman, Age 5

Monday, December 4, 2017

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

We can all agree that the Christmas season is magical, and is full of many wonderful traditions that all of us enjoy -- like going to church Christmas Eve, seeing family members, opening presents Christmas morning, and much more.

One tradition that it is a large part of my family's holiday traditions begins the four Sundays before Christmas. On this day we get out our Advent wreath which includes five candles. Four of these candles are to be lit the four Sundays before Christmas, and we light the fifth candle Christmas Eve. Because there are five people in my family, we each get to light a candle. Each Sunday throughout the Advent season, the family member who lights the candle also does a quick devotion, which usually consists of a prayer, a short reading from the bible, a few questions, and sometimes a song.

These traditions made me want to know more about the Bible. I ended up creating a Bible reading plan, and read the entire Bible in three months. I now have a much better idea of what it means to be a Christian, and this is how I can best explain it:

Last summer, I went on the middle school youth trip to Massanetta, and I was looking forward to it weeks in advance. When our first day was over, I was settled in my room and getting ready for bed. I was about to put in my contacts and they were not in my bag. I frantically searched and searched, yet I couldn't find them. After a few minutes of hyperventilating, I finally started to realize that this was actually happening.

I was shocked by how nice people were to me about my situation there. No one made fun of me for forgetting my contacts, and I had many friends and adults help me see, both from our church and others. They were my eyes. More importantly, they showed me what it means to be a Christian. This proves that God places people along our way to help guide us throughout the good and bad of our lives.

Dear Lord, thank you for guiding our lives with both your word through the Bible and surrounding us with your everyday angels who are guided through you. Amen.

Jake Royster, 9th Grade



Kyle Royster, Age 12

Tuesday, December 5, 2017

There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people? ---- Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted.
John 6: 9, 10

For me, the Christmas season starts the first Sunday of October, the day the first bags of donated food are dropped off at church for the SMPC Loaves and Fishes food drive. I have organized the Loaves and Fishes food drive for seven years. At the beginning, October was a very stressful month as I hoped we would match the pounds collected by the previous organizer and later began competing against myself.

But that changed the year Freda Smith, our church administrator, suggested we start lining the bags up against the walls of the Narthex and the Chapel Building. Now, I watch the line of bags snake around the walls of the Narthex past the Coffee Grounds, sometimes meeting the bags lining the walls coming from the Chapel. Each bag of food is a gift to an unknown recipient and a reminder of what we can accomplish as a community. But most of all it is an acknowledgement that we at SMPC know that our Christian community includes those beyond our own doors.

Sometimes when our SMPC kids come to the pantry with their own food drive donations, I tell them that to our Loaves and Fishes clients, each one of them is a miracle. Every day, someone who did not know how they were going to put food on their table that evening leaves a Loaves and Fishes pantry with food to feed their families. To them this is an answer to a prayer, a miracle.

And so my Christmas begins with these gifts of food to those people in our community who through a temporary misfortune or an unexpected expense find themselves needing this most basic of needs. And I don't worry anymore if I will reach an arbitrary goal. I just thank our God for bringing me to SMPC and allowing me to watch as we become part of his miracle!

God of Love and Grace, may we, in gratitude, take advantage of all the many opportunities our church offers us to love our neighbor. May we remember to share our bread. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Jennifer Basquin



Emery Hicks, Age 7

Wednesday, December 6, 2017



You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you. Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord, the Lord himself, is the Rock eternal. Isaiah 26:3-4.

Some of my favorite Christmas memories from my childhood include setting up the wooden tabletop nativity scene with a music box that played *Silent Night*, singing Christmas carols while my sister played the piano and receiving a box of homemade candy from my grandmother each year in the mail that included fudge, peanut brittle (my favorite) and divinity. Our house was beautifully decorated and my mother, a wonderful cook, would prepare a feast for our family of seven. The dining room table would be set with fine china and fancy glasses. My father would have Christmas music playing in the background. At the end of Christmas Day there was a birthday cake for Jesus that my mother had made and as a family we would all sing *Happy Birthday* to Jesus. I am so blessed to have these treasured memories.

As a wife to Chris and mother to Sydney (13) and Joe (10) we are creating our own traditions. Decorating our Christmas tree is one of our favorite family activities to kick off the holiday season. In honor of my father I make sure we have Christmas music playing while the children hang the ornaments on the tree that they made from their early school days and the ones we have collected from our travels throughout the years. We are blessed to have my husband's parents living nearby to join us for a Christmas dinner of chicken pojarksi. This is a favorite childhood dish of Chris' that has since become our traditional Christmas meal. Additionally, I have continued my mother's tradition of baking a birthday cake for Jesus. We light a candle on the cake, dim the lights and all sing *Happy Birthday*. This simple gesture provides another opportunity for us to reflect on the significance of Christmas at the end of what can be a busy, fun-filled day.

Dear Heavenly Father, please help me stay focused on the significance of Christmas and not get carried away or distracted with getting all the things done on my to-do list. May I not become so task oriented that I forget to be present in the celebration of Jesus' birth. May as a family we pause regularly to feel your presence in our lives and to reflect upon the gift you gave us on Christmas Day when Jesus was born. May our minds be set on you. Amen.



JoX

Denise Wilcox

Dillon Rine, Age 6

Thursday, December 7, 2017



I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you. Luke 2:10b-11 And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. Matthew 28:20

We knew Christmas would be different when Pearl Harbor was attacked on December 7. A family celebration at my aunt's home ended abruptly when the news came on the radio. I remember asking my parents, on the way home, "will there still be a Christmas?" They assured me that there would always be Christmas.

On Christmas Eve, I went to bed hoping that Santa Claus could visit our home (and many others) to deliver a Christmas tree and gifts. On Christmas morning, I was overjoyed to see that we had a beautiful Christmas tree, a room full of presents and a letter from Santa Claus tucked under the edge of the now-empty cookie plate. Santa thanked me for the cookies and milk, and explained that with so much of the world involved in war, it was very difficult to locate all the families on his list. He asked us to store our tree decorations after Christmas and put up our own tree the next Christmas.

One of the best presents that year was a burgundy-colored car which I could sit in and pedal up and down the sidewalk -- the last new car until after the war! There were blackouts, air raid drills, ration coupons, shortages, knitting of 6 x 6 squares for afghans, newspaper drives, metal and rubber band collections, and visits to Bundles for Britain (though I don't remember the purpose of those visits). Broadway lights and our street lights went dark until the war ended.

So many changes! But one thing never changes. Whether we are young or old, in good times and bad. Jesus comes to us and abides with us. Always – even this year! Thanks be to God. May the peace and joy of Christmas be in our homes and hearts now and always.

Heavenly Father, Thank you for entering our lives and abiding with us. We pray that you would help us, and all of your children, to be aware of your presence in the best of times and in the worst of times. Amen.

Cynthia McClelland



Sophia Lebda, Age 10

Friday, December 8, 2017



I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So, don't be troubled or afraid. John 14:27

The first time I heard Amy Grant singing, “I need a silent night, a holy night to hear an angel voice through the chaos and the noise. I need a midnight clear, a little peace right here...”

I was driving alone as tears formed in my eyes as I realized I, too, was longing for a clear night, an angel's voice of assurance, a little peace in my troubled day.

Perhaps you've had a similar “holiday” experience when the right words and perfectly paced song, or a portion of your playlist, reflect what's going on with you. During my drive I didn't realize how tied up I was in my Christmas to-do list, yet when I heard those words I exhaled, realizing I, too, was longing for peace of mind.

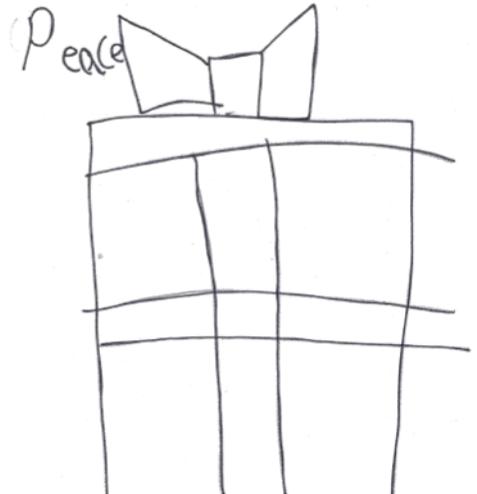
It's been said peace is something we all long for. An enduring sense of serenity keeping us even-keeled during the storms of life. If you are a peace seeker this Advent season, what type of peace would comfort you? How will you be mindful with your body and your senses to discover peace amidst the “chaos and the noise?”

And if you're currently in a peace-filled place in your life how are you being called to be present to, aware of, to share the peace which is after all the peace of Christ, with a family member, friend, or the stranger in your midst? How will you share the hope in the message to “Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.”

Luke 2:10

**Deep peace of the running wave to you.
Deep peace of the flowing air to you.
Deep peace of the quiet earth to you.
Deep peace of the shining stars to you.
Deep peace of the gentle night to you.
Moon and stars pour their healing light on you.
Deep peace of Christ,
of Christ the light of the world to you.
Deep peace of Christ to you.
--Gaelic Blessing**

Kathy Garner



Dillon Rine, Age 6

Saturday, December 9, 2017



Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. James 1:17

When I was six years old, my mom had a collapsed lung three days before Christmas putting her in the hospital. Kids weren't allowed in the hospital due to the severity of the flu season, so my brother and I couldn't visit her. I just kept thinking, "Is she going to be okay? When will she come home? By Christmas? How are we going to have our special Christmas Day without my mom?"

My grandparents came in town earlier than usual to help take care of my brother and me while my dad took care of my mom in the hospital. Thankfully, mom's doctor knew how important it was to be with family for Christmas, and especially with kids at home who weren't allowed to visit. The doctor did something special that never happens. He was able to let her leave the hospital with a chest tube still intact in a way that she could be home for Christmas Eve into Christmas Day, but would have to return to the hospital after Christmas for surgery.

I was thrilled to hear this news! To me, Christmas is all about coming together as a family and celebrating Jesus' birth with people you love. My mom coming home was my gift that year. Although my mom was home, she was in pain and unable to do much. My grandma had always helped my mom in past years with the food and traditions, but this year she had to do everything. My grandma knew how important it was to the family to keep with our traditions. She did everything she could to make sure we had Christmas just as we always do with the same foods and routines. This event really showed me what Christmas is all about...Jesus, family and traditions.

Dear Lord, as we prepare to celebrate Jesus' birth, bring us together with family and friends near and far and guide us in a way of love and unity. Remind us of the gift you have given with your son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and the importance of giving to others. We pray for good health, happiness, peace and prosperity. In your name we pray, Amen.

Hannah Biggers, 9th grade



Reid Cook, Age 7

Second Sunday of Advent, December 10, 2017

Morning Devotion

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. Romans 12:4-5

Do you hang stockings for Santa to fill on Christmas Eve? In my memory three sets of Christmas stockings hang by my fireplace – two knit by my mother, two knit by a friend and two I knit myself. This Christmas I've been thinking about knitting. You start with some yarn, basically just a long string. You'll also need knitting needles, basically sticks. So, there you have it—a string and some sticks. Oh, and of course, you need a pattern to tell you what to do and the determination to learn how to do it.

I'm sure you can connect this idea to many observations about life, how simple things can become useful, how having a plan can produce great things, how learning a new skill can be challenging, but my Christmas thought from knitting is about connections. Look at a stocking or sweater. Notice that it is made up of loops that connect with each other. If you break the thread, the whole knitted thing will begin to unravel, but all is not lost, because you can catch hold of the broken place and connect the loops again.

We may agree with the thought that all people are children of God, that we are all connected. We may talk about our families or friends as being knit together in love. Sometimes, though, we experience a break in those bonds. There's a certain person we don't feel connected to, a group of people we don't feel at one with at all. Christmas and knitting remind me that what's damaged can be mended. The one strand that connects us can be broken, yes, but it can be put together again, too. Jesus is born, bringing healing to the broken places in our lives, bringing hope for joy and peace.

Lord, help us to notice when some part of our connection with others is broken. As we celebrate the birth of the Savior, open our eyes to our need to be saved, mended, repaired. We rejoice that you come to each one of your children in love and power to make us whole. Amen.

Dotty Dysard



Logan Rine, Age 8

Second Sunday of Advent, December 10, 2017

Evening Devotion

Be still, and know that I am God! Psalm 46:10

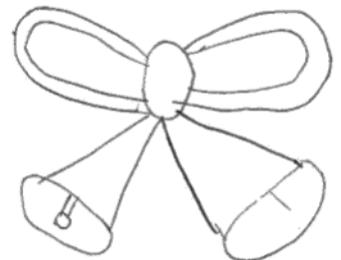
2015 – What a year! One we wish not to repeat, yet our family grew so much. Through all the ups and downs, we all needed so badly to be still and know that God was with us. The year began with Charles and me prayerfully making the happy decision to move to Waxhaw. After much preparation, we figured our existing home would sell fast, but it sold in two weeks! Our new home was not finished and we had nowhere to live.

Thankfully, we found a first floor apartment for short-term rental. It happened to have three bedrooms – God was definitely with us! First, we offered refuge to our daughter Laura and our grandson Charlie as they left a difficult relationship. Then, we learned our beloved family dog had a brain tumor and we made the tough decision to put him to sleep. And finally, our younger daughter Fraser bravely decided to leave an unsafe college environment and moved in with us to heal. Our empty nest was full again and we were all catching our breath.

As we were settling in, Charlie's scheduled cranial surgery came in October. He spent four days in the children's hospital, then back to our apartment for recovery and fitting for his helmet. Again, God was with us every step of the way even when we struggled to feel his presence.

Our new home was "supposed" to be ready in November, but we soon realized we would all be spending Christmas in a 1000-square-foot apartment. With our tiny living area, we had to place our Christmas tree outside on the patio! We had enough space for everyone to sit inside with a rocking chair for Charlie and Laura. In a way, this was all a blessing. After all we had been through individually and as a family, each evening of Advent gave us a peaceful, quiet moment to feel God's presence. We would dim the lights and quietly sing carols, saving "Silent Night" for last as it always worked like magic to put Charlie to sleep! It was our opportunity to be still and know that God was with us.

Dear Lord – We thank you that in the midst of our crazy lives, we can always count on you to carry us through. This Advent may we all have a still, quiet moment to know that you are God and you are there while we calmly prepare for the greatest gift of all – the gift of your son, Jesus Christ. Amen



Krista Casey

Elise Ullman, Age 7

Monday, December 11, 2017

He says to the snow, “Fall on the earth,” and to the rain shower, “Be a mighty downpour.” So that everyone he has made may know his work, he stops all people from their labor. Job 37:6-7

For as long as I can remember, I have loved the sight and smell of Christmas trees. Every year, my family would gather, put on our favorite Christmas albums, sing carols, and decorate our tree. In 1984, Kenny Rogers and Dolly Parton released an album called *Once Upon a Christmas*, and ever since then, when I hear those songs, I am transported back to the days of my childhood and our holiday traditions.

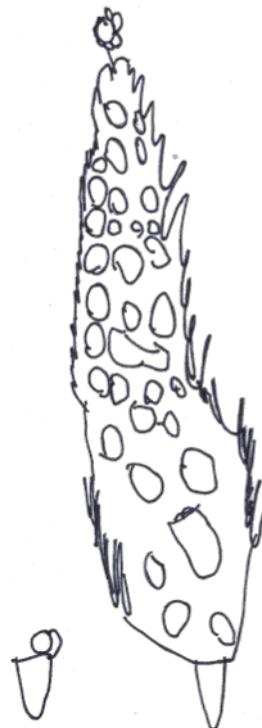
Fast forward 33 years – my family’s iPod contains *Once Upon a Christmas*, and we all enjoy singing those familiar songs! I anxiously await the day that our tree goes up and we can carefully place the ornaments we know and love on its many branches. Sometimes at night, I lie next to the tree like I did as a child and look up at the twinkling lights. I am hopeful that my children will love and appreciate this time of year as much as I do...and maybe even the incredible harmonies of Kenny and Dolly, as well.

One of my favorite songs on the album is called *The Greatest Gift of All*. The lyrics are perfect:

*Just before I go to sleep
I hear a church bell ring
Merry Christmas everyone
Is the song it sings
So I say a silent prayer
For creatures great and small
Peace on Earth, good will to men
Is the greatest gift of all*

Loving God, thank you for the gift of your son and for the gift of song. Thank you for blessing us with traditions that draw us together and closer to you. May we take pause this holiday season and prepare for the coming of our Messiah. Amen

Lisa Kuszmar



Grayson Gage, Age 5

Tuesday, December 12, 2017



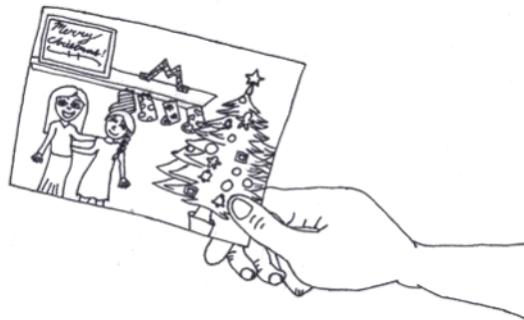
Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. Romans 12:2

When I look back at family Christmas pictures, I'm often struck by how often an unexpected event becomes a memory that pulls on my heart strings. Those funny things families do: the cake that got dropped; the tree we let the kids pick out when they were small (hello Charlie Brown Christmas!); the year my older daughter put her sister in the ornament box and pulled her around the house instead of decorating the tree. These are the times I wish I could travel back to at some point.

I am also aware of how these moments are sometimes missed now that we have so much convenient technology. As much as I want to think "oh that's not me," I am sometimes guilty of being the Mom asking my kids to wait so I can finish "just this one quick text".. saying, "I just had to get back to that person." Lots of us talk about how our kids are growing up too fast, or that they may only want to do certain family things with us one or two more years. We think we absorb all of what is happening because of course, we CAN do it all! But can we? What do we really miss?

I have realized that being present is a choice, it is something I have to consciously make happen. I need to take steps to practice better listening, to physically put distractions away so I do not miss moments that I wish I had back when I get older. Usually, when we make a choice to do one thing, we are making a choice to give up something else. Checking on my neighbor is more important than my Target run; helping my mom with chores at her house is more important than updating my space; listening to my kids is more important than talking to them sometimes; and that "important" email will still be there in a few hours. I hope I can get better at making the choice to visit that neighbor, call that friend, to hear all of what is said to me, rather than doing something else that will not be remembered in years to come. This time of year is special, meaningful and a time of renewal. To me it is a time of hope. I am human. I am thankful that God is always with me, despite my human intentions.

Gracious God, Thank you for giving us the blessing of today. May the light of Christmas help us to use our time wisely, listen to others, speak graciously to others, and be grateful. Amen.



Hallie Mitchell

Abigail Mitchell, Age 11

Wednesday, December 13, 2017



Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it.
Proverbs 3:27

As a young girl growing up in a suburb of Youngstown, Ohio, Christmas held a very special place in my heart. Our church members would choose several needy families in the community, and we would gather gifts and food items to donate. My father taught us at an early age, that we would be much more involved, than just to buy and wrap their gifts. He also volunteered our family as one that would actually take the food and gifts to the families on Christmas morning. It was a humbling experience for us to be with those who were in need. I've never lost the joy that I felt in my heart upon seeing the appreciation and the happiness that these families gave to us in return.

So, last November, I made the decision to find a family to 'adopt' for Christmas. Now, please understand, I am a single woman and I am far from wealthy. But, I researched and managed to locate a family, via Facebook, on a site called, "Everything's Free in Union County." The subject that caught my eye said, "Wanted. Christmas tree for my family. " Upon reading further, I learned that this man had recently lost his job, he had a wife, five children, and they were all living in a one-room hotel. I made arrangements to meet the family, and gave them their requested tree. After seeing their living conditions, I then went on a "mission" to help them further. I discovered friends, family, a few church members, neighbors, and coworkers who also wanted to help out. I kept everything a secret from the family. I had a neighbor who offered to treat the family to a Christmas dinner at the neighbors' home, where they presented all the gifts, a GoFundMe check for over \$5,000 (yes, you read that right), and a used car. I wasn't able to be present for this dinner, because I was in Ohio with my own family, but, my neighbor videotaped the reaction of the family as they opened the card with the check in it, and the information about the donated car. Their joyous reaction brought me and my family to tears as we watched the video. So much has evolved with this family since I found them on Facebook. They moved into a new apartment, the mother and father both got new jobs, they both have a vehicle now, and I think this year they will probably buy their own Christmas tree and gifts. Plus, we have a wonderful friendship. When the father thanked me, I told him the only thing I want in return is for him to help someone else in need, when they are able to do so. It's what my father taught me, and it was a lesson I will not soon forget.

Dear God, bless the families in need throughout the holiday season and always. Help us to reach out to them in whatever way we can, all year long. Help us to give from our pockets, but more so, from our hearts. Help us, Oh Lord, to put others before ourselves. Help us to realize the best gifts are the ones that we give, and not just the ones we receive. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen



Sally Jones

Lacey Cook, Age 10

Thursday, December 14, 2017



Arise and be doing. The Lord be with you. 1 Chronicles 22:16

I have wonderful memories of Christmas as a child and also as a mother with a child of my own. I loved making holiday crafts with friends, baking cookies with my daughter for her to take to neighbors, and decorating the house. Parents/grandparents, brother and sister-in-law, husband, daughter, and I would have such a good time being together to celebrate Christmas. Church on Christmas Eve, gifts on Christmas morning, and a great day celebrating the birth of Christ.

Then, grandparents passed away, divorces, and an empty nest changed the dynamics of my Christmas season. Sadness descended on me as decorations appeared in stores, endless carols on the radio, starting before Thanksgiving, and friends planning their family get-togethers. Then, after many prayers, and with God's guidance, I realized that holidays are lonely and difficult for many people. I had a wonderful daughter that I would see, and many great friends to get together with during the season. I had a lot more to be thankful for than to complain about. I needed an attitude change if I was ever again to savor the blessings of Christmas. So as a Hospice volunteer, I took on extra patients who needed comforting, collected toys from friends for toy drives, and cleaned out my closet for a coat drive. Small things to me maybe, but trying to do something for someone in need. It is much more rewarding to give than to receive.

I now look forward to Christmas and wonderful traditions, including, of course, Advent activities and services at SMPC. After being away for four years, I am so blessed to be back.

I also try to keep in mind that the Christmas spirit should be shared all throughout the year!

Heavenly Father, as we enter into this Christmas season, please remind us to help others in need, and make us mindful of what we are really celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ. Amen



Kathy Rasimas

Katie Conerly, Age 11

Friday, December 15, 2017



The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory; the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the father, full of grace and truth. John 1:14

At our house, Christmas is an exciting holiday! We have lots of traditions to help us get into the Christmas spirit. After we finish our turkey and mashed potatoes on Thanksgiving, we turn up the Christmas music classics and start the search for our Christmas tree. I love putting up all the decorations and setting up the train around the tree! We also set up our nativity, carefully placing Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus nestled in with the animals. All of these traditions are ways that we love to celebrate the birth of Jesus. One favorite tradition of mine is hanging the ornaments on the Christmas tree.

Every year, my dad and sister bring down the heavy ornament boxes from the attic and that's when the festivities begin. We sort through each box and start to hang them on the tree. We turn on the Christmas music in the kitchen, we make cups of hot cocoa and we go through each and every box deciding which ornaments to add. What I think is special is that every ornament has some sort of memory attached to it. For example, my dad has a collection of the White House ornaments going back to the 1980s and my mom has many snow baby ornaments that have special emotions connected to them like joy. And of course, I have my own special first Christmas ornament. Not only do I enjoy every moment of decorating but I love that it brings everyone in my family together.

I really like how we all take a couple of hours out of our busy schedule and stop whatever else we're doing to come together and enjoy these lovely moments. I think that's really what Christmas is all about -- coming together to love and rejoice the birth of Jesus. Even though the Christmas music and holiday decorations are fun to enjoy, Jesus is the real reason why we celebrate Christmas. Advent is a time when we await the birth of Jesus and celebrate his arrival in the world and that is why I love this time of year.

Dear Lord, thank you for all the wonderful memories and traditions that we have to prepare for Christmas, and please help us to remember the real meaning of Christmas; the birth of your son Jesus. Merry Christmas! Amen.



Kara Cushman, 9th Grade

Evan Williams, Age 10

Saturday, December 16, 2017



I bring you good news of great joy. Luke 2:10

In our family of four children, our parents orchestrated the long wait until Christmas with joyful traditions: an Advent calendar, baking together, our grandparents arriving for the holidays, the privilege of being old enough to read the Christmas story on Christmas Eve, choosing one present to open after the late-night candlelight service, hanging stockings and leaving cookies and milk for Santa.

As we have gotten older the holidays seem more stressful, less about joy and more about entertaining and appropriate gifts. I see people everywhere who seem irritable and down. And except at church, I hear little about the birth of Jesus. Although we still get together as a family, our family is much smaller and everyone is busy.

My father, Chuck Atwell, wrote this poem. It seems to put the holidays and our lives in good perspective.

Walk Closer

A stranger, standing there alone-
Away from friends, away from home
Could be re-set from wrong to right
Could be brought from darkness into light.

Walk closer to him.

A casual friend you see each day
To whom just "social" words you say
Might need your hand in darkened hour
Or friendly warmth for moral power.

Walk closer to him.

A fellow man that you don't like
Where friendship's spark seems not to strike
May be distressed, in mortal need
Of Christian love, of honest deed.

Walk closer to him.

Your mind is troubled and life unsure,
No selfish task comes out quite pure.
No greedy goal will satisfy,
Nor earthly pleasure gratify.

Walk closer to HIM.

Dear Lord, thank you for your most perfect gift and please help us all put the joy of this season in our hearts and those of others. Amen



Marion Kay

Sara Elizabeth Gage, Age 8

Third Sunday of Advent, December 17, 2017

Morning Devotion

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path. Psalm 199:105

I am a first generation immigrant in a nation of immigrants. My family came to New York City in May 1952. As a result of my family's journey I have always been interested in large population movements whether it was the movement of the Native Americans over the Bering Strait or the flight of the Jews from Egypt. What drove those people to take those risks?

For some time we lived in Upper Manhattan which at the time was a polyglot of Irish, German, African American, Asian and Latin American families. This was just before the musical "West Side Story" was written.

A Christmas memory was the annual hunt for the Christmas tree in the streets of Manhattan. The best part I remember was my mother haggling with the Polish grocer who also spoke heavily accented English. My mother never truly learned to speak English well. Oddly enough she knew how to get her point across when haggling over a Christmas tree!

I often wonder how the hand of God brought me to NYC and later to the Carolinas. I rarely think that my life was by happenstance. People come into your life for a reason. Little did I know that when I arrived in New York City in 1952 that my wife had been born the month before in Georgia. We finally met in Charlotte in June 2001. I still tell her I got here as fast as I could!

Lord, in this season we remember how Mary and Joseph made the trip to Bethlehem. Please guide our path in life as you guided them through that journey. Amen.

Manny Villa



Katie Powell, Age 7

Sunday, December 17, 2017



Evening Devotion

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. 1 John 4:7

Although I've spent most holidays in Charlotte, my family has traveled to Colorado occasionally to spend the Christmas at my grandparents' house where I would sleep in my dad's old bedroom. Traveling to Denver meant snow; my brother and I couldn't wait. Christmas morning brought buckets of the white stuff! Well, maybe eight inches, but who's counting. My father decided that now was a good time to teach me how to drive in the snow. I was almost 16 and I jumped at the chance to slide our way around an empty parking lot. The minute I started to enjoy drifting the car was the minute that I started taking risks. I gunned it in a straight away and turned the steering wheel hard as we slid sideways, consequently high-centering the car on a nearby curb. Out of options, my father called my grandfather who arrived with every piece of equipment imaginable. He and my father worked together like fathers and sons do -- negotiating, debating and strategizing. Finally admitting defeat, a tow truck was called and the car was eventually freed.

I look back on that memory fondly, not only for the humor (although my dad wasn't laughing), but also to remember my grandfather's optimism and devotion. I felt like his second son and he would have done anything to help me. His presence that day didn't feel so significant but now that he's passed on, it reminds me of the true meaning of Christmas. I'm grateful to be surrounded by people who stand by me even when I mess up. My grandfather was there for my father and he was also there for me. I hope that the spirit of Christmas reminds you of people who have supported you in big and small ways. There is no greater joy than knowing that you're surrounded by love.

Dear Lord, Thank you for loving us and watching over those we care so much about. Please help those who feel alone and have no one to count on this Christmas. Amen.



Nate Dracon, college junior

Katie Powell, Age 7

Monday, December 18, 2017



Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Luke 12:33-34

Christmas has always been one of my favorite holidays. I know, it sounds completely cliché, but for me, this was one of the few times of year I wasn't the bullied poor kid.

My aunts could shop! Christmas was the time that I got a pair of Michael Jackson parachute pants, my first pair of designer jeans, and a Teddy Ruxpin. When I went back to school after the holidays, I finally had some of what all the other kids had. However, it was more than just that to me.

In my eyes, family was probably more important than anything else. As much as I loved getting all the stuff, I loved seeing my aunts, uncles, grandparents, and mom all in one place. When I lived with my grandparents during high school, I even got to have a massive Christmas with all the relatives I usually only got to see during the summer when I stayed with my great aunts. I would do anything just to sit on the couch in close contact with a family member. Most of the photos I see of those holidays show me draped over a lap or with an arm around a shoulder. I loved the stuff, but I loved my family more.

As adults, Cullen and I have worked hard to make Christmas a family event. It makes me proud that our boys are just as excited to be with us all as they are to get the newest Lego set or video game. They excitedly ask who is going to join us for dinner or go to church. They cheer when they know that everyone is coming over. I'm so thankful and blessed that they understand the gift of family and hope they find a way to pass that on to their kids.

Dearest Lord, please be with those who do not have family this season. Be in their hearts and let them feel your hand on their shoulder so they know they are not alone. For those with family this season, please help them to see the gift they have and appreciate it. Help them to welcome others into their hearts and homes so that no one has to be without family this holiday. Amen.



Kari Case

Katie Conerly, Age 11

Tuesday, December 19, 2017



But now, thus says the LORD, who created you, O Jacob, And he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; You are mine." Isaiah 43: 1-2

Just like any child I couldn't wait for Christmas, as my hometown of Helsinki, Finland became an enchanted wonderland all dressed in its winter white and its decorated storefronts promising the magic of the season. Those last weeks before school break would find me skiing to elementary school on days we had sports scheduled in a nearby park, or ice skating during gym class and wondering what Julgubben (Santa Claus) would be bringing me on Christmas Eve.

Just like all families, ours had its own traditions, lighting the Advent candles each week, decorating the tree before Julgubben's arrival, and of course and most importantly waiting for that knock on the door (no, he does not come down the chimney in Finland) when the jolly old man himself would make his appearance to the children of the house to pass out presents.

Although we celebrated Christmas, not once do I ever recall much about celebrating the birth of Jesus (although we did light the Advent candles each week), it was more about family being together, the excitement of Julgubben's arrival, and of course a great meal. I don't think that was intentional, not at all, it's just the way it was in our family. It wasn't until I moved to the United States that I gradually started to see the reason for the season, to understand that the little baby born in the manger was born for me, and that he was calling me by name.

God Jul (Merry Christmas)!

Dear Lord, You call us by name, let us hear your voice and follow. Amen

Tom Palmgren

(a Swedish-speaking Finn)



Logan Elliott, Age 10

Wednesday, December 20, 2017



The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. John 1:14

One of our favorite traditions is a trip to the Billy Graham Library to enjoy the Christmas festivities. They have everything decorated for Christmas with beautiful lights and trees, horse drawn carriages, storytelling and much more. Our favorite thing by far is the live nativity. This includes Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus along with wise men, shepherds and a wide assortment of live animals.

On one occasion when Lilly was a toddler we took her to see the live nativity and she was enchanted with it. We stood there on a cold winter evening. She just stared taking everything in, especially the camel, sheep, goats and especially the donkey. This went on for close to an hour before Sheila and I suggested we go in the library and get some hot cocoa. Lilly protested, I mean really protested the way only a two-year-old can. She wanted to watch the nativity a while longer. We decided it was best to let her continue watching until the shift change for Mary, Joseph, Jesus and the others. By this point hypothermia was starting to set in and Sheila and I overruled Lilly and we went into the library to warm up. Once we warmed up we went back out to look at the nativity a little longer.

This memory has always stuck with Sheila and me over the years; as Lilly has continued to grow in her faith she has always remained enchanted with the nativity. One of her favorite activities at SMPC growing up was helping Ann Whitlock set up the nativity at church.

There is something very enchanting about that miracle that occurred 2,000 years ago and changed the world. The Word became flesh and dwelled among us full of grace and truth.

Lord, help us to be enchanted this Christmas by the miracle of your birth. May the grace and truth you brought to this world live in our hearts throughout the year. Amen.



Brent McAnally

Lilly McAnally, Age 10

Thursday, December 21, 2017

Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you. 1 Corinthians 11: 1-2

Every family has their own annual Christmas traditions. Our tradition that my Nana insists on every year is definitely one we never will forget. Ever since I can remember, on Christmas Day we all dress up to reenact a real life manger scene with my cousins. Anna is the oldest girl, so she's Mary. Dylan is the oldest boy, so he's Joseph. Kyle, Austin and Tanner are the middle children so they're the Wise Men. Nana, Grace and I are the angels. Jake is the youngest of all of us so he's the little lamb, and Uncle Michael and Uncle Scott are shepherds. Aunt Mary Kathyryne makes the programs and gathers the costumes, and Mom helps direct everyone. Aunt Kim takes pictures and videotapes the whole thing. Finally, with some nagging from Nana, Dad always reads the Christmas story from the Bible. We end by singing carols, some in German because of Nana's German heritage.

I used to think that this tradition was embarrassing, especially putting on silly animal costumes, but we do it for Nana because we love her and it makes her happy. Recently I've been thinking a lot about Jesus and what he did for us. He laid down his life so that we could go to heaven and be with him one day. He didn't have to do it, but he did anyway, because he loves us. We don't always want to do what Jesus wants us to do. As a teenager, there are many things asked of me that I don't want to do like clean my room and study for tests, but I do it anyway. If we pray and remember what Jesus did for us, we will be more willing to do the hard stuff because nothing is as hard as what Jesus did.

So this Christmas, if you are forced to do annoying family traditions remember that you are making a memory with your family. You will look back on the fun you had and be glad you did. The real meaning of Christmas is not how well we perform in a play, a fancy meal, or the picture-perfect Christmas card, but remembering the story of Jesus' birth no matter how your family chooses to celebrate. Who knows? Maybe one day I will be wearing the silly angel halo as a grandmother with my own children and grandchildren acting out the Christmas story.

Dear God, Thank you so much for what you did for us. Thank you for loving us no matter what we do and for giving us an eternal life with you. Be with us this Christmas and help us to see your presence in everything we do. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Maddie Dellinger, 9th Grade



Jake Zagora, Age 5

Friday, December 22, 2017



In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of mankind.

1 John 1:1-4

The Lord Comes In

The Lord comes in amid the bleat
of dirty goats and stinking sheep
wrapped up in rags, not royal robes
old shredded cloths, his first new clothes.

And Mary, still a child it seems,
is lying in a bed of hay
where cows and oxen come to eat
and sleep until the break of day.

The Lord comes in amid the rush
of compact cars and pickup trucks.
He stands beside the homeless man
who finds his food in filthy cans.
His Spirit permeates the blocks
where pastors, pimps, and addicts walk.
He loves all people just the same
despite our guilt, despite our shame.

Lord Jesus, as we celebrate your birth, you did not choose the fate of famous king or emperor a carpenter is who you were.

So let us craft your work with those who live outside in tattered clothes and help the ones who need the most since all mankind is who you chose. Amen



Tom Strohl

Logan Rine, Age 8

Saturday, December 23, 2017



For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the air, and all that moves in the field is mine. Psalm 50:10-11

His name is Bonnie Belle. I don't know why that upset me so much, but it did. Just as much as his plucked and all-too obvious breastbone sticking out did. Bonnie Belle is a beautiful rose-breasted cockatoo that I fostered recently for Companion Parrots Re-homed in Pineville. The rescue told me he had lived in a cage in a field before being rescued by someone who took him in, but had to give him up as a parrot wasn't really the right fit for her. He was then adopted, hoping that was his forever home, but when the rescue (who pet sat him) saw how skinny and plucked he was getting, they asked for him back.

It's not very hard to DNA test a parrot and know what his gender is. So this "Boy Named Sue" parrot got a girl's name because no one could be bothered to even know who he was early on. Now it's too late: He calls himself Bonnie Belle and, honestly, he doesn't know the difference.

Bonnie was horribly nervous. Everything startled him. No wonder, he lived in a cage in a field on a farm — that's no place for a cockatoo. It took him several days to stop shivering every time I entered the room. He would quietly say, "It's OK Bonnie Belle, it's OK," comforting himself as he found himself in another unfamiliar situation. But as the days turned into weeks, Bonnie perked up. His feathers grew back a little, he gained a little weight. He loved to see my husband and me, but he still wouldn't come out of his cage. He was too scared.

We loved Bonnie Belle. He was the sweetest bird. Bonnie would call out to us, "Hello!" and "Bye, bye" every time we left the room, making me want to turn right back around and never leave the room. His cage was upstairs in front of a large set of windows. He loved watching everyone walk their dogs and he let me know every time someone was in front of the house — he was the perfect watch dog. One day, the Fed Ex man rang the door. I opened the door and as he gave me my package, Bonnie Belle called down, "Hello? Hello? Help! Help!" I cringed in embarrassment, ready to assure to Fed Ex man that I wasn't holding anyone hostage.

Bonnie went back to Companion Parrots Re-homed where he is up for adoption, looking for a loving home. He's just one of the parrots that come to our home, a temporary reprieve between where they come from and where they are going while they get a complete health check. I'm glad we can be this safe harbor for some of these wonderful, sweet and beautiful creatures. Even if it breaks my heart a little at a time.

God of all creatures – furred, feathered or two-legged – I know you watch over me, watching over them, taking care of your flock. Please bless and protect all who are waiting and hoping for a permanent home. Amen

Melissa Kauffman



Sara Elizabeth Gage, Age 8

The Fourth Sunday of Advent, Christmas Eve, December 24, 2017

Morning Devotion

Instead, be kind and tender-hearted to one another, and forgive one another, as God has forgiven you through Christ. Ephesians 4:32

My father had a special place in his heart for small children. Whenever he saw one, his face would light up with a big smile as he dug in his pockets for change to contribute to their piggy banks.

As my brother and I turned into adults and had children of our own, Mom and Dad started rotating Christmas holidays between Georgia and South Carolina where we lived. I especially remember their visit with us the year Curtis was three years old. The only thing he wanted from Santa was a big, yellow Tonka dump truck! Fortunately, the coveted truck appeared under the decorated tree Christmas morning. Excited squeals filled the room from both Curtis and my Dad.

While I started breakfast, Daddy and Curtis got dressed and headed outside to play with the truck (so I thought). They were gone only a few minutes when the front doorbell began to ring. As I opened the door, I saw Daddy, Curtis and the truck *filled* with sand in front of me. Before I realized what was about to happen Curtis scooted around me, put the truck in the foyer and dumped the entire load of sand on my carpet. The house was again filled with squeals – not excited ones! Breakfast was delayed while I “cleaned up” the MESS.

As I think about this special Christmas, I realize I have also made many MESSES in my lifetime. Thanks to my Heavenly Father and his Son, whose birthday we anxiously await, I know my MESSES have also been “cleaned up.” Am I forgiven and still loved? Yes, just as I forgave and still loved Daddy and Curtis that wonderful Christmas morn.

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for your son, Jesus, and for forgiving and loving us when we make our MESSES. Amen.

Nancy Guy



Caroline Guy, Age 9



Natalie Guy, Age 6

The Fourth Sunday of Advent, Christmas Eve, December 24, 2017

Evening Devotion

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” Luke 2: 13 - 14

When I was a little girl, Christmas was such a magical time. Every Christmas Eve, my parents would pack up the car full of presents and we would travel an hour away to my grandparents' home. The excitement of the evening began as we sat around the table eating our Christmas dinner. We were a small family, just my grandparents, my parents, uncle and me, but you could feel the love around that table.

After dinner, I was always counting the minutes until present time! However, my grandfather had just one rule on Christmas Eve; no presents were to be opened until he had read the Christmas Story of Jesus' birth from the Bible. So, after dinner, we would all sit around him as he read. Growing up I was too young to understand the importance of how special it was that we were gathered together. As I got older and my grandfather continued to grow older and weaker in health, hearing him read became priceless to me. The love he felt for the Lord still resonates with me.

My grandfather has been gone since 2008, but the tradition still continues. My husband, Bill, has the great pleasure of reading the story every year to our children on Christmas Eve. And our children know that not one present shall be opened until we pause, listen, and remember the true meaning of Christmas!

Dear Lord, Thank you for the sweet gift of family that provides such precious memories for our souls. Let us always remember the true meaning of Christmas, your son, Jesus Christ. Amen

Anessa Powell



Lilly McAnally, Age 10

Christmas Day, Monday, December 25, 2017



Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all you lands! Serve the Lord with gladness; Come before His presence with singing. Psalm 100:1-2

My family attended the Christmas Eve service at my small rural church every year throughout my childhood. It was quiet, reverent, and filled with my favorite carols. The service always ended the same way. My Grandma Janice and my mom stood with a volunteer choir and belted out “Oh Holy Night” as the clock struck midnight and the church bells rang. It **was** a holy moment for me and much of my church family. I later joined them as a young adult. Three generations of women participating in a blessed ritual of song.

My grandmother, Janice Lane, was one of those people whose whole body began to move at the first hint of a melodic note. She tapped her toes, swayed to the rhythm, clapped her hands, and had a gift for harmonizing. Beautiful music seemed to reside in her very being. I remember my mom, sister, aunts, and cousins gathered around her piano each Christmas after the family meal. She played and we joined in her renditions of “Jingle Bells,” “Silent Night,” and “Oh Come All Ye Faithful.”

My Grandma Janice is still alive, but I lost the woman I knew and loved long ago to Alzheimer’s Disease. There are so many things I miss about her. She had a servant’s heart and an encouraging word delivered with a hug for everyone she met. I miss the countless moments we shared in her kitchen and especially the singing.

Last Christmas, four generations of my family gathered in Grandma Janice’s living room to shower her with song. We poured our hearts, memories, and longing into every Christmas carol we could recall. I remember looking up at her during our first song and seeing the tears begin to slide down her face. It was accompanied by a smile. The music sparked something inside her and she was present in that moment. Even if she couldn’t speak our names, she knew we were family and belonged to each other. There was a wholeness in our time together that I hold close to my heart. Oh holy night, indeed.

Dear Heavenly Father, Thank you for your gift of music and for the way it can touch our very souls. May we remember our elderly family, friends, and neighbors this holiday season who might find joy in a song. Amen.



Shelby Ullman

Elise Ullman, Age 7

Merry Christmas!



Addison Hicks, Age 11



South Mecklenburg Presbyterian Church

8601 Bryant Farms Road • Charlotte, North Carolina 28277 • 704.544.0404

www.SMPChome.org