



2018 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 14th 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 2018 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.

First Sunday of Advent, December 2, 2018

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

Long ago I made my own Christmas cards -- nothing elaborate. One year they were printed from my children’s finger paint swirls in a baking pan, another time a pen and ink sketch of a star over the outline of a stable. They had to fit in a standard letter envelope.

What took the most planning was what to write inside when just “Merry Christmas” didn’t seem enough. Some years I chose a Bible verse, some a carol or a poem. In the season’s frantic rush I went back to one carol more than once. Written in 1849 by Edmund Sears, a Unitarian pastor, “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear” still speaks today.

And ye, beneath life’s crushing load,
Whose forms are bending low,
Who toil along the climbing way
With painful steps and slow;
Look now! for glad and golden hours
Come swiftly on the wing.
O rest beside the weary road,
And hear the angels sing!

Are you weary, feeling crushed by everything that you have to do, everywhere you have to be, everyone who needs your attention? The message of Christmas is glad and golden. Don’t miss it. Rest beside your weary road. The angels are still singing about the wonder of Christ’s coming. Hear them.

Dear Lord, thank you for the many messengers of Christmas, for all the voices that proclaim our Savior’s coming. Help us to rest, even if only for a moment, and hear the angels’ song again.

Dotty Dysard



Addison Hicks, Age 12

Monday, December 3, 2018

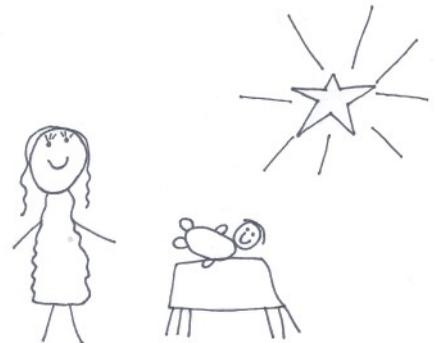
The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Luke 1:30-33

When our daughter, Adeline, was three years old, she was by herself on the floor playing with her toy nativity set as I looked on from the kitchen. She had Mary in her hand and said, “Don’t be afraid Mary, you are going to have a baby.” And then she picked up baby Jesus and said, “This is your baby, his name is Jesus.” By this time we had read to her over and over again at her request a children’s book that told the story of the birth of Jesus. Much to my surprise she already had it pretty well memorized, especially the part about Mary being baby Jesus’ mommy. She is definitely my daughter, because she is as mesmerized by babies and the thought of being a mommy one day as I was when I was a little girl. And therefore it came as no surprise to me that she had found great admiration for baby Jesus and his mother, Mary. I shared the same admiration when I was little. Growing up I didn’t have a child’s nativity set like Adeline does to play with but every once in a while my mother would let me hold the porcelain Mary and baby Jesus from our nativity set at home and I loved it. And at church I couldn’t wait for my opportunity to be promoted from an angel to Mary in the nativity play and I still remember well the year when I finally got to play Mary. Now that Adeline is older, each year we enjoy pulling out my nativity set and setting up one by one each of the pieces- the animals, the shepherds, the wise men, and Joseph. But our favorite piece is Mary who gently cradles Jesus in her arms.

Let us come and adore the One who is to be born. O Come let us adore him.

God guide us through this time of waiting and anticipation. As you did with Mary, take away our fears and fill us with hope. Amen.

Rev. Whitney Bayer
Associate Pastor for Congregational Care



Adeline Bayer, Age 6

Tuesday, December 4, 2018

And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased. Hebrews 13:16.

Step 1: Gather recipes.

Step 2: Buy the ingredients.

Step 3: Bake the cookies.

Step 4: Give them away.

It's an easy process and one I truly enjoy. Walking the aisles of the grocery store and filling the cart with bags of sugar and flour, chocolate chips and sprinkles, and boxes and boxes of Challenge salt-free butter arms me for days and days of baking.

Many years ago my three daughters were my assistants. We were not very neat in the kitchen, as the counters, floors and the shirts we wore revealed the steps of the baking process. Little hands were sneaking chocolate chips and tiny fingers were dipped into the red and green sugar sprinkles for a taste. And of course, we had to sample the Hershey's kisses that we had unwrapped for the peanut butter blossoms. Fast forward to the present and now I have grandchildren to share this process with. My heart is full as we stir, sprinkle and shape on counters dusted with flour while Christmas carols are playing in the background.

Finally the many Tupperware containers of cookies are ready to be assembled into bags. I love the smiles of surprise from my choir director, my next-door neighbor, and the librarian as I share my love of Christmas and baking.

Father God, thank you for Christmas traditions and how they draw us closer to you. Let the joy of the season fill our hearts, and help us to see your loving presence each day in all we do.

Rose Weinheimer



Hunter Gates, Age 9

Wednesday, December 5, 2018

A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord ; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken." Isaiah 40:3-5

For as long as I can remember, Christmas has been a huge part of my life. My family and I have practiced many Christmas traditions throughout the years. Starting in late November, we put up the tree and decorate our house. We track the days on our Advent calendar and blast Christmas music throughout the house. We fill stockings for the Salvation Army and select an angel from the Angel Tree at church. We go to Christmas Eve service dressed in our red and green and celebrate at our neighbor's house after. We go to bed in our Christmas pajamas, eager to wake up to the gifts Santa has brought us. We eat a huge breakfast on Christmas morning and celebrate the special day with family.

Since these Christmas festivities have become traditions, it can sometimes be hard to focus on what is most important during the Advent season. Since I stress about school, finding gifts for my family and friends, and sticking to family traditions, I have often found myself failing to make way for the Lord during the Christmas season. This year, I still hope to stick to our Christmas traditions, but also keep the true meaning of Christmas close to my heart.

Dear God, Thank You for our many blessings and the gift of Christmas. Please help us focus on what is important this Christmas and spread Your love and joy to everyone. Amen.

Caroline Sinclair, 10th grade

SMPC's Angel Tree ministry offers not only toys and clothing, but also nourishing meals for families in need. Please consider taking a tag from our tree in the Narthex and returning your gift by Sunday, December 16.



Emery Hicks, Age 8

Thursday, December 6, 2018

Do not let kindness and truth leave you; Bind them around your neck, Write them on the tablet of your heart. Proverbs 3:3

In 1999, Joanne Huist Smith unexpectedly lost her husband a few weeks prior to the Christmas season. She and her three children were devastated, and Joanne was finding little joy in the anticipation of the holidays. But, two weeks before Christmas, small anonymous gifts began to appear on the Smith's doorstep each day with a kind note signed, "Your true friends." As the daily gifts continued, Joanne's heart began to open up, and she slowly was able to engage in the beauty of the season with her family and friends.

Fast forward to 2014 when Joanne put her Christmas gift experience into a book entitled, *The 13th Gift: A True Christmas Miracle*. It was later that fall, after the book had been published, that our friend, Holly, suddenly lost her 62 year old husband. Hoping to bring some joy into Holly's life, a dozen friends wrapped up small presents with notes, secretly leaving them on her doorstep while she was at work. On day 13, a copy of Joanne's book was left for Holly. She immediately read it, and the message of the story, as well as the thoughtful gifts from her friends, helped to raise her spirits during that difficult time.

So, as we enter this Advent season, let us remember that for some, Christmas is not joyful, but a bleak time filled with sadness. Our intentions and actions of small random acts of giving and kindness can truly have a beautiful and powerful impact for anyone who is experiencing grief, illness, pain, loneliness, or depression.

"In the bleak midwinter, Frosty wind made moan
Earth stood hard as iron, Water like a stone
Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow
In the bleak midwinter, Long ago

What can I give him, Poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb
If I were a wise man, I would do my part
Yet what I can, I give him -- Give my heart."

- *Words by Christina Rossetti.*



Kathy Paquette

Blayke McDonnell, Age 5

Friday, December 7, 2018

And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Matthew 25:40

Growing up in the Greek Orthodox Church, Christmas was a little different than most Christian Churches. There is always the Christmas story but there looming over all the children is the midnight service that always seems solemn, long and worst of all mostly in Greek. My parents didn't do a good job buying Christmas gifts either. My parents would say, "Christmas is every day for you kids." That is something I relate to now as a parent more and more each year.

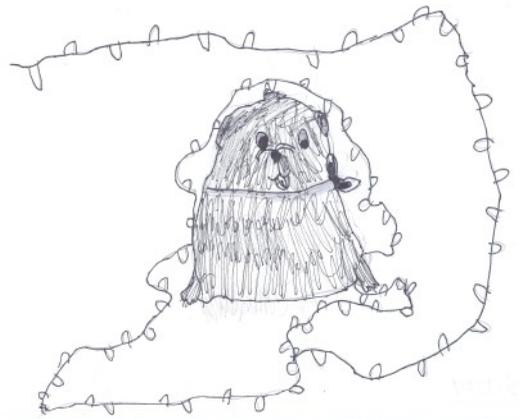
As a husband and parent, the stress of trying to buy things for family that has everything stresses me out. I would look under the tree and we would always say the same refrain, "This is the year we are definitely cutting back." Gifts stack around the tree in every direction and we end up opening gifts until well after lunch. I always shake my head but at least it is fair. For that I feel my parenting skills are validated.

Then we start going to SMPC. We are introduced to the Alternative Gift Market. The experience hooks my whole family. We remember not just the Christmas story of a child in a manger and the promise of salvation, but we remember that this child comes into the world in the humblest way. That humility is the birthplace of salvation and a reminder to care for "the least of these." That tradition lives in our house and hearts and I pray it comes and stays with each of you.

Lord, help us to remember our neighbors in need not only during the Advent season, but throughout the year. Amen.

Daniel Webb

If you would like to give life-giving gifts this year that spread the love of Christ, SMPC's Alternative Gift Market has what you need. Our market begins December 2 in the Narthex and continues through December 16.



Natalie Guy, Age 7

Saturday, December 8, 2018



Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. Luke 2: 11-12

As a little girl, the first Saturday in December always brought a lot of activity and excitement to our house. That was the day my mom began pulling all the boxes of Christmas decorations down from the attic. My grandmother owned a ceramics studio and had given us countless holiday treasures over the years: lighted Christmas trees, Gingerbread houses, Santa's sleigh pulling eight very fragile reindeer.

I would sit with my mom as she carefully unpacked each box and wait anxiously for the one I looked forward to the most. Finally, we would get to it, a beautiful hand painted ceramic nativity set made by my grandmother. I would spend hours marveling over each piece and playing with the set before finally setting it up in the manger to admire during the Christmas season. I loved that beautiful set not only because it symbolized the Christmas season but because it reminded me of our family in Florida.

My mom still has that treasured nativity set, and though my grandmother passed many years ago, it is a sweet reminder of her and those special December Saturdays of my childhood.

One year, after we started our family, my mom invited us over and presented us with a box. As I began opening it and unwrapping different pieces I realized it was a nativity set, one my mom had lovingly made and painted for our new and growing family.

Needless to say that nativity set rests in the box that I now look forward to opening the most each Christmas season. I delight in watching my children play with the set before helping me arrange each piece in the manger. I pray that my children cherish this special set, lovingly made by their grandmother, to celebrate God's greatest gift to us, Jesus.

Dear Lord, thank you for the magic of the season when we celebrate Jesus' birth and for the beloved traditions and memories that bring such joy, comfort and love. Amen.

Cristy Powell



Katie Powell, Age 8

Second Sunday of Advent, December 9, 2018



I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. John 13: 34-35

Almost one year ago, I was diagnosed with Bell's Palsy—half of my face was frozen. The mouth part looked like I had just come from the dentist, half of my forehead looked like it had lots of Botox (no wrinkles! But only on half), and one eye didn't blink for three months. I talked funny for a couple of weeks, and my lips wouldn't smile until almost Christmas.

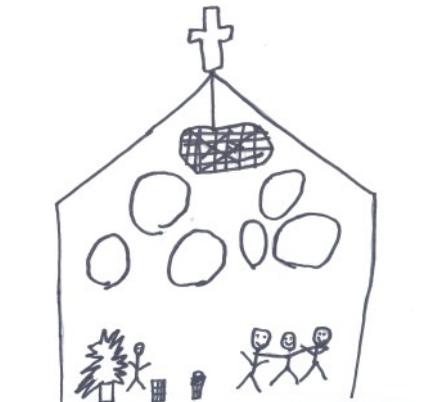
Four days after my diagnosis, it was Sunday morning. In the video update I sent my mom that day, I said, "I'm heading to church, where I'm expecting to get loved on pretty hard." Let me just say, YES! I did, in fact, get loved on pretty hard. I sat in church with my sunglasses on (to disguise the staring eye). And afterwards, I was hugged and encouraged, over and over. Lots of people said to me, "I can't believe you are here," because I could have been hiding out in bed with my crooked face. But I was at church, on purpose, because I knew exactly what I needed and that I would find it here – lots of love and support.

The love didn't stop. For weeks, sneaky saints left encouraging notes and happies on my desk at work. It was tangible love, and I soaked it in.

I am beyond blessed to be a part of this church family, and I think one of the best things we do is love one another.

Heavenly Father, thank you for this wonderful church family. Let Christ's light shine through us as we love one another. Amen.

Mary Katheryne Zagora
SMPC Financial Administrator



Evan Williams, Age 11

Monday, December 10, 2018

“I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people” Luke 2:10b

Toys under the Christmas tree and excited children’s voices – those days were over in our home. The college-age children were a joy (most of the time!), but it was not the same. Then our first grandchild joined the family. His father was apparently overwhelmed by parenthood, leaving mother and baby with us. So that Christmas, the fun of a baby in the house, and toys under the tree, returned to our home. Since then, there have been two more grandchildren, and a great-grandchild. The beautiful, spiritual, religious Christmas and near-chaotic family Christmas: what a combination! How many for Christmas dinner? Who has enough chairs?

Children at Christmas. Family at Christmas. Even if we don’t have them in our homes, we can have them in our hearts. And we can help bring the joy of Christmas to children and families who need a little help. Angel Tree. OFCB (Haiti). Toys for Tots. A Child’s Place. Salvation Army Center of Hope. Make a Wish Foundation. So many organizations and ministries waiting for our help to spread the joy of the season, and to increase our joy in the process.

Lord, help us to receive the gift of your Son with gratitude and joy, and to spread that joy through sharing with others. Amen.

Cynthia McClelland



Owen Conerly, Age 10

Tuesday, December 11, 2018

Jesus said, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst." John 6:35

This past April was my first time ever going to Haiti. It was a great adventure and an unforgettable time. During my entire stay in Bayonnais, everyone I met was nice to me. They always treated me with care and always made me feel welcomed and appreciated and I wanted to return the favor.

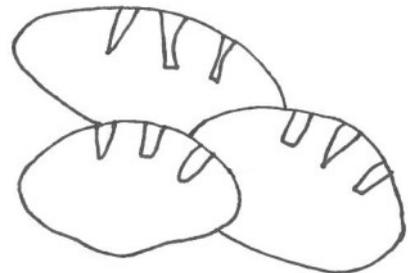
One of our adventures was a trip to the market. It can be quite a long walk to get there. People from the village and the surrounding mountain communities place everything on their heads or load up a donkey or a moped and travel twice a week to sell their goods. I remember seeing people selling rice, beans, smoked fish, chickens and even live goats.

On our walk back from the market, we could smell the awesome aroma of freshly baked bread. Luckily, we were given a quick tour of the local bakery and I noticed that there was one loaf of bread left. I was getting pretty hungry so I asked my Dad if we could buy it. They were selling the loaf for several gourdes, which is their local currency. Since we didn't have any gourdes on us, we offered to buy the bread for three American dollars. An interpreter explained that this offer was in their favor, and when they agreed, I was excited to have a delicious smelling loaf of freshly baked bread in my hands. Just as I was getting ready to taste it, I was reminded that it was best not to eat anything prepared outside of the guest house. Deciding I probably shouldn't risk it, I didn't eat the bread, even though it smelled amazing.

That evening, I asked Actionnel if it would be OK to share the bread with my new Haitian friends who would soon be crowding onto the porch in order to hang out with us. He said, "Of course! No need to slice it up, they'll know what to do." So I offered the loaf to a friend who took it, broke off a bite-sized piece for himself and then passed the loaf on to the person sitting next to him. The person beside him did the same. Within a few minutes, the bread had been passed around the porch many times allowing everyone to have several turns pulling off a portion until it was gone. They all seemed very grateful to me and were happy to receive it.

Earlier in the day, I had been kind of bummed when I couldn't taste the delicious smelling bread, but being able to share it with many new friends made me feel so much better than having it myself.

Dear loving God, thank you for providing us with everything we need and more so that we may be more giving and generous to others. Amen.



Collin Cushman, 7th grade

Adeline Bayer, Age 6

Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee, because he trusteth in thee. Isaiah 26:3

Recently, in Dr. Matthew Brown's Bible Study class, he asked us what we would include in a survival kit for a child who is leaving home. Answers were varied. They included the essential coin for the dire phone call, verbal reminders, that home would always be there to receive that child, and that kindness matters. I shared what I actually did. My item was to remind my children that they could not go anywhere where God is not.

As abstract as my item was, I felt it was, first, a way that connected them deeply to me at all times because we would always be part of the same triangle: God, them, and me. My reminder would assure them that God would not only protect and support them, but would be there with a watchful eye to remind them of what is acceptable, appropriate conduct. Embodied in my thinking and expectation was the fact that it gave me a much desired peace. The peace that greatly reduces the anxiety that often accompanies the parent- child separation.

The scenario to which I refer is not the only one that could give cause for anxiety. Consider how we feel when suddenly our lives are changed by unexpected circumstances: be they a job loss, the death of a loved one, a troubling diagnosis, or other. These are conditions that could remind us of the Bible passage which says: "These things have I spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world." (John: 16:33). These words could actively help us to put our trust in God and depend on our faith for a measure of peace that could pass all understanding.

So let us remember that Jesus Christ is also called The Prince of Peace. And because of who we are and whose we are, we can always approach Him to calm our fears and help us to be agents of peace. Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you : not as the world giveth, give I unto you." (John 14:27).

Dear God, in this Advent season, help us to be aware of the importance and need for peace in our lives. The angels sang to the shepherds: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill toward men." (Luke 2:14.). So God we pray: " Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me." Amen.



Thursday, December 13, 2018



Restore us, God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved.

Psalm 80:7

It was 1983 - the coldest Christmas ever in Atlanta: high 17, low 0. Debi and I were expecting our first child the upcoming summer of 1984 so with temperatures dropping we happily boarded a late flight to spend Christmas with her parents in Florida. The anticipation of new life, of a new season, and the joys and respite of a Christmas weekend were enchanting to a young couple trying to build a life together.

Disembarking into the distinctive Florida atmosphere, meeting her excited and loving parents at the gate for the ride to their almost rural township home, opening the door to the aromas of Christmas baking and evergreen seemed right out of a Hallmark movie.

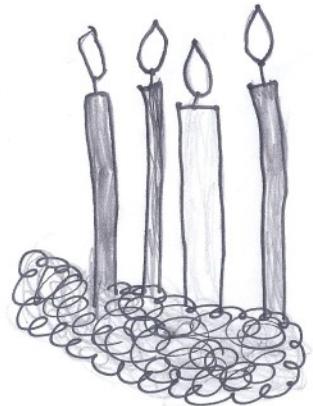
Six hours later those thoughts and feelings vanished like a lemming's silver breath on the tundra. My mom called that early Christmas eve to share that my brother (who is nine years younger) was in a terrible auto accident and was fighting for his life. He was unconscious, and she asked me to come home. Her voice was calm and direct, but she let me know we were needed in Atlanta.

Debi and I gathered our unpacked bags, less Christmas gifts, and headed back to the airport for a standby flight to Atlanta. The ride to the airport was silent. No radio blaring Christmas music as we both stared out the window watching daylight overcoming the Christmas lights. We all hugged goodbye and left Florida.

Arriving in Atlanta that cold late afternoon was surreal. The Christmas lights were taking over again while a dear friend ferried us from the airport to DeKalb General Hospital. Thankfully winter coats, gloves and hats were provided from their closets. We headed, in silence, to a chaos experience I had never known..

My Dad met us. His face will be forever fixed in my mind. We saw imprinted lines of hopelessness, worry, being out of control, repressed panic, confusion and despair. His body hunched, his hands quivered, and his eyes were blood shot red. He hugged us both and thanked us through a silent weep for coming.

Bruce survived that Christmas Eve and after 35 days in a coma and months of rehab he went home Easter Sunday with a permanent disability that now requires constant care.



Continued on Friday, December 14

Elise Ullman, Age 8

Friday, December 14, 2018



The Christian church's tradition of the Longest Night* provides an opportunity to reflect on the grace and presence of God and I look forward to experiencing God's grace at this service with my new church family.

Dr. Brown recently said God is for us, God is with us and God is in us. This short statement summarizes my life's knowledge. Knowledge from God-given experiences as well as knowledge earned from study and chasing my curiosities. Experiences are given in Grace. They are amoral. Bruce's accident was not an act of God against Bruce or our family, but was a tribute to His perfect world. It was a simple law of physics that prevented wheel friction from holding a specific mass onto a curved icy road. The force was tremendous.

The delay of Bruce's death, now 35 years and counting, was not a miraculous intervention by God, but an act upon earned knowledge of attending ER doctors and nurses.

We all have our personal stories. We all have experiences of God giving us knowledge and we have earned knowledge too, so I encourage all to attend SMPC's Longest Night Service to show others in disparate need that God is in us and that God is for us.

The service can also be a reminder that God is with us. Christ came, and went on to heal, to forgive and to remind us to love everyone as we follow Christ knowing that he eventually dies a painful death forgiving and loving his executioners.

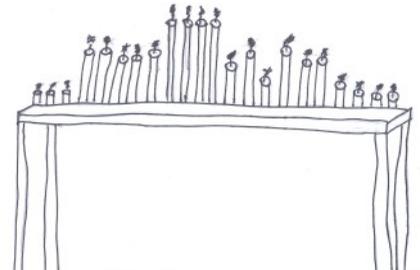
I wake up every morning and deliberately choose to follow Christ, to be a part of his resurrection and thank him for his grace-giving experiences and my free will, curiosity and strength to pursue knowledge to better serve in the body of Christ.

Gospel of Thomas Saying 70:

Jesus said, "If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you."

Reyn Wheeler

**If you or someone you know is approaching the Advent season with a heavy heart, please join us on Tuesday, December 18, 7:00 p.m. in the Chapel for our Longest Night Service.*



Addison Hicks, Age 12

Saturday, December 15, 2018

Let all that you do be done in love. 1 Corinthians 16:14

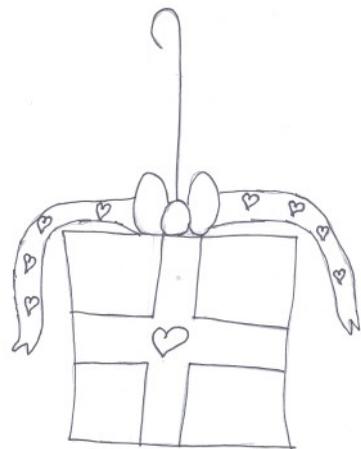
The smell of cookies baking in the oven and the sound of Christmas songs brings me back to my childhood memories with my mom and grandmothers.

Spending time with loved ones and sharing experiences are so special. It's these moments together that are truly magical, but also simple. I am grateful for these special moments spent together laughing, learning, and creating. Also, sharing these wonderful baked goods with family and friends spreads the joy and cheer of the season.

With my mom and grandmothers now in heaven, I appreciate time and experiences with family even more. I enjoy creating experiences with my family so that they will someday create memories with their families. Truly enjoy every moment you have with your loved ones and embrace giving to all!

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for your daily blessings -- time together, and experiences and know that all is done in LOVE. May we remember to embrace a giving heart and appreciate every moment. Amen.

Anna Vechnak



Maddy Vechnak, Age 9

Third Sunday of Advent, December 16, 2018

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, “Woman, here is your son.” Then he said to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

John 19:26-27

It seems a little strange to have chosen this particular scene from Jesus’ life for Advent. Advent is hopeful waiting, joyful expectation, and excited anticipation, but Jesus speaks these words from the cross just before his death. This year, though, the theme of what God has been speaking into my life is all about the creation of family. And I don’t mean in the traditional way that we typically think about at Christmas—a baby is born to a mom and a dad, and they make a family. I mean family as a verb. It’s what Jesus does here. His mother, the one who carried him in her womb, who heard his first word, who celebrated his first steps, who heard his first cries, is standing at the foot of the cross, and if Jesus was as human as we believe him to be, he is heartbroken at the sight. His response stops me in my tracks every time. He “families.” He creates a family that is not bound by blood or legal documents but by love and commitment.

My daughter, who is six years old, reminded me of this lesson recently. It was Saturday night, and we had just gotten home to discover that I had left my purse in Columbia, SC on our way. As my husband and I batted ideas back and forth about who was going where and when to fix this mistake, he said, “I’ll have to go get it in the morning, and Clara will have to come with me because I won’t be able to sit in worship with her, and you are on the platform.” Clara, who had been sitting quietly on the couch during this exchange quickly piped up. “Nope, I can go to church. I’ll be fine. I can sit with Ms. Mary Katheryne (Zagora).” Church is her home, and you are her family.

Just as Jesus made a family when he was born to Mary and Joseph, so he made a family at his death. Who is God calling you to family this Advent season?

Loving God, who loves us as children, give us today a spirit of family, and help us to see everyone we meet not just as your child, but as our sister or brother. Open our eyes to who you would have us to enfold into our own families, and give us the courage and compassion to do so. Amen.

Rebecca Guzman
SMPC Director of Spiritual Formation



Clara Guzman, Age 6

Monday, December 17, 2018



I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. Romans 1:11-12

When I was little, I always participated in the church Christmas play. I remember how exciting it all was. We got to go to the church and pick out our sparkly angel costumes that I thought were the prettiest things in the world. We got to practice all the songs together and got so excited when it was finally time to sing them. After the show, everyone was telling us how good we did. It was one of my favorite Christmas traditions.

However, what I didn't realize at the time was the deeper connection that I was forming with both God and the church. The play made me excited to learn God's word which has continued to this day. Also, it allowed me to make bonds with church members both young and old. These positive bonds and mindset that started young allowed me to grow my faith even more every day.

Through the years of getting more involved in the church, I have gained a family of people that care about me. Without being able to see these people with a faith so strong support me, I would never have become who I am.

Dear Lord, please protect the people that love us and support us every day and give us the strength to do the same for each other. Amen.

Courtney Parrish, 9th grade



Caroline Guy, Age 10

Tuesday, December 18, 2018

Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

1 Thessalonians 5:11

Some of the greatest gifts I have ever received have been in the form of words – kind notes, emails, texts and holiday cards. At the risk of exposing my hoarding tendencies, I confess that I save Christmas cards. Not every single one, just those with hand-written sentiments that make my heart sing. And as long as I'm sharing, I also save thank-you notes and all correspondence that contains encouraging and heartfelt words. My Outlook inbox contains a folder that I titled "Encouragement" and it is filled with hopeful, happy emails that I have received over the years – most from my SMPC family. I have a deep appreciation for words that bring me comfort, give my spirit a needed boost, and make me smile.

One such Christmas card I've saved through the years ended with these beautiful words: "May you and your family have an awareness of God's blessings in the coming year." Wow! Those powerful words centered me as I faced the New Year, opening my senses to God's daily presence with me.

Another sweet and encouraging note I treasure quoted Aibileen from the book and film "The Help," saying: You is kind. You is smart. You is important. These words came at a time when I needed to be reminded that I am a precious child of God.

Kindness matters. And when we choose to share words of compassion, gratitude, and kindness, they may be the perfect gift that someone needs to receive and will cherish forever.

"Kind words can be short and easy to speak,
But their echoes are truly endless." - Mother Teresa

God of compassion, in a world that at times seems filled with hate, please fill our hearts with love. As we prepare to celebrate Christ's birth, make us aware of those who need to be encouraged and to feel your love. Let your light shine through us and help us to spread kindness through our words and actions. Amen.

Terry Gaines



Brooke Hicks, Age 12

Wednesday, December 19, 2018

On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down, and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Matthew 2:11

When I was in middle school, my mom began collecting Dept. 56 "Dickens Village" Christmas houses. We always went out the day after Thanksgiving to select our house for that year. We spent hours setting up the houses, wiring lights and creating our village. When we were finished, we would turn off the lights and let the village light up the room. It was always beautiful! After college, I started adding houses to the collection with the agreement that one day they would all become mine. Our collection grew quickly.

My Mom passed away in 1997 and the village sat in boxes. I had no interest in setting up the houses without her. The houses remained in the attic. Our Christmas spirit just wasn't quite there and it did not feel right to set up the houses.

It was two years before Dad and I decided to bring the village out again. It was tough, but it reminded us of Mom. Yet, something was still missing. I really needed a sign that she was watching over us... And it was not too long before I got it!

A week before Christmas I went shopping for a house to add to the collection. While I was out, I signed up to win a set of Dickens houses that were being given away in honor of New Year's 2000. I put my name in the box and didn't think about it again until Christmas Eve when my phone rang. It was the storekeeper calling to let me know I was the winner!

I burst into tears - tears of joy because I knew that was my Mom's way of letting me know she was watching over her family! I love the entire collection, but the New Year's set is extra special to me.

Lord God of heaven and earth, you revealed your only-begotten Son by the guidance of a star. Bless our home and fill us with your light as we joyfully await the arrival of your Son, Jesus. Let your love and grace shine upon us and guide us this holy season. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.



Meg Hollingsworth

Ariana Rhodes, Age 5

Thursday, December 20, 2018

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. Philippians 1:3-5

There are a few traditions from my youth that stand out as being particularly meaningful to my foundation in faith practices. I grew up in a family of six children. My younger brother Mike was born with severe Down's Syndrome. Every Christmas, my mother would remind us that Mike was our "Tiny Tim," a reference to the handicapped youngest child depicted in Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol.

One of our holiday traditions included listening to the recording of this wonderful story every Christmas Eve before we headed to bed. There are many important themes in the story that point to generosity and compassion. Additionally, Mike and Tiny Tim were both central in families that recognized the value of what it truly means to be thankful for family blessings and that many blessings come in a variety of disguises.

Christmas morning followed another tradition that was non-negotiable for our family; everyone had to go to church before we enjoyed opening our gifts. Folks hearing this story have often responded in horror that our parents would make their children wait so long to open their presents!

Recently, I reflected on our Christmas Eve and Christmas Day traditions realizing that our family traditions helped inform what I truly believe is the "reason for the season." Love God and love neighbor and cherish family. Celebrating Christmas with our large family gathered together, attending worship before opening our gifts, watching the excitement of Mike bursting with joy just looking at the lights on the Christmas tree, sharing a boisterous delicious feast lovingly prepared by our mother really sums up the words spoken by Tiny Tim, "God bless us, every one!"

Loving God, thank you for the blessings of family, friends, and faith community during this season filled with expectant hope. In gratitude for our abundant blessings, help us discover fresh opportunities to lend a hand to help our sisters and brothers everywhere to know the love of the Triune God. Amen.



Diane Giannola

Sophia Lebda, Age 11

Friday, December 21, 2018

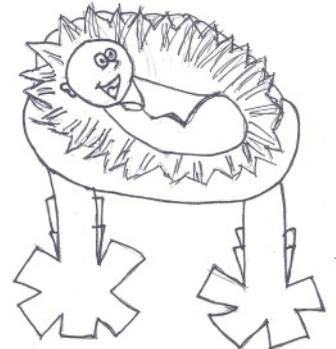
At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 18:3

I grew up in a wonderfully loving home that never was big on Christmas traditions except a tree, lights, and my mom’s baked goods. Unless you also count my father’s persistence each year that his December 21st birthday present not be wrapped in Christmas paper. Or my grandma’s annual homemade treat shipped to us fresh from her Memphis home. It contained everything in her pantry – cereal, nuts, pretzels, raisins, more nuts - all laced with spices and Worcester sauce. It smelled through the packaging. You either loved it or hated it. I hated it. But home for the holidays is the only place I ever wanted to be as a kid. I yearned for it all year long. I am confident God was there, I just didn’t look for him.

Dan and I did much of the same as our parents until our daughter Katie hit Middle School. Katie was making new friends. She wanted to do something fun and liked baking Christmas cookies with me. So one year she invited her new friends to help. A smart Jewish boy named Max, a gentle smiley Catholic girl named Sarah, sweet, quiet Katlyn, and artsy Shannon. Over the years many more joined and others left. It has been 12 years since we first hosted the annual Christmas Cookies party. Children from all faiths and sexual orientations gather in our home to decorate Christmas trees, wise men, stars, the Star of David, snowmen, dreidels, and reindeer. I adore each child as if they were my own. But they are not my own, they are God’s children.

Dear Heavenly father, as we celebrate the birth of your son Jesus, remind us of your love for all of your children. May our actions of acceptance, celebration of difference, and communion with others rule our lives this holiday season. In your name we pray. Amen.

Gena DeChant



Isabel Duffy, Age 11

Saturday, December 22, 2018



He saved us, not because of the righteous things we have done, but because of his mercy. Titus 3:5

I remember it was a really gross green color. But I was a kid, so that just made it even cooler. A green bicycle with 18-inch wheels, brakes on the handlebars, and thick tires perfect for off-roading (if only in the backyard). I imagined myself riding around the neighborhood, the coolest kid on the street.

I remember crawling up into Santa's sleigh at Blackhawk Hardware after Thanksgiving and telling that poor man all about that bike I saw in Walmart. In the most persuasive tone I could muster, I listed all my good deeds for the year (I even invented a few for good measure, hoping he wouldn't notice). How could he deny me something I clearly deserved after all my good deeds that year?

We're so conditioned to think of the world like this—and for good reason! This is how much of the world works, after all. You get what you work for, earn your rewards, and so on. But that conditioning, that tendency to think in those terms doesn't really apply to Christmas.

We receive the gifts that come from God, not because of how many times we've shown up early to church that year, or as Titus would say, not because of the righteous things we have done. God gives us gifts because we are loved deeply and authentically. Because God's love for us isn't the kind of love that keeps track or holds grudges.

Instead, God gives gifts because God loves us. Hopefully, this is why we give gifts to our loved ones, too. I'm certain it's why I got my green bike years ago.

Holy God, we thank you for your gift of love. We pray this Advent that we learn to give to one another like you give to us. Help us to love one another authentically and well. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Evan Tidwell-Weinzierl



Katie Conerly, Age 12

The Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 23, 2018

But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. Luke 2:19

We, mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers, can look back and remember the days that a new little one entered our world. What a miracle that was! And what joy we felt when we gazed into those beautiful eyes! With each birth we also look into the future and see how one person can make a difference in our world.

I can only imagine how Mary, the mother of Jesus, felt on that miraculous night. She was chosen by God to be the mother of the Messiah! And angels sang and welcomed Him into our world. But, with all of this, Mary knew in her heart that her baby was more special than even she could imagine or fathom.

This all reminds me of the beautiful song, "Mary, Did You Know?"

"When you kiss your little baby, you kiss the face of God.

That your baby boy is heaven's perfect lamb.

The sleeping child you are holding is the great 'I am!'"

She probably didn't understand or know what was ahead for her little one, but she knew that God would be with her in the years to come. She pondered all of this in her heart on that first Christmas morning!

"Mary, Did You Know?"

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for sending your precious Son into our world, our Emmanuel, God with us. Thank you for each new baby coming into our world. I pray that you will be with each one as they grow "in wisdom, and in stature, and in favor with God and man." Amen.

Carol Stillerman



Elise Ullman, Age 8

Christmas Eve, Monday, December 24, 2018



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

This year I have become very much aware of the different kinds of families I have in my life. I realized that there is more than one kind. The first one is a “biological” family. I have my daughter, my three sons, their families, and this year I was blessed with two great-grandsons. My biological family is mine forever and I love them all, each and every one. I am so very grateful that God has given me the blessing of a large and happy family.

Then there was my work family. This one had bosses and co-workers. Some became lifelong friends and others faded away once I left that job. Out of sight, out of mind.

And there is my family of friends. These are people who have come into my life; some are there only for a short time, some for a year or two and then the ones who have become lifelong friends.

And last, but not least, there is my church family. My family at SMPC is very special and important to me. I look forward every Sunday to seeing everyone. I love being involved in many of the committees and activities and being a part of this family. I believe that God has given me this family to be with and, like Him and my “biological” family, they have always been there for me through the good and bad times of my life.

I feel I have been truly blessed all my life with loving “families” without whom I could not have made it through.

Dear Lord, my prayer this Advent season and always is for everyone to realize the blessings of all the different kinds of families we have in our lives and that these families will be loving and kind, always there for us when we are in need. Amen.

Kay Dano



Jake Zagora, Age 7

Christmas Day, Tuesday, December 25, 2018

Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Philippians 2:3-4

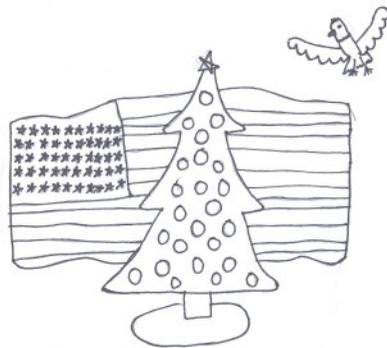
Christmas 1979. I arrived at King Salmon AFS, Alaska, as a young Air Force captain to vice-command the station. I arrived on December 12, which made me acutely aware that I would be missing this Christmas, my infant son's first. The commander greeted me and then departed on Christmas furlough, leaving me to command all 400 airmen. He reminded me to stop by the kitchen on Christmas Day to thank the cooks for the Christmas meal they would be preparing for the base.

I showed up at the kitchen just after breakfast on Christmas Day, thinking the cooks would just be starting preparations. They had, in fact, worked through the night. I didn't know any of these people, and they didn't know me. When I walked through the door, they had been assembled to hear whatever I, their new commander, had to say to them.

I don't remember what I said, and it probably wasn't particularly memorable for them, either. What I saw was a beautifully prepared Christmas meal of turkey, ham, all the traditional side dishes, desserts, and both ice and butter sculptures. White tablecloths and evergreens. They hadn't prepared this for visiting VIPs, because nobody was going to visit such a remote outpost that time of year. They had instead prepared it for their fellow airmen, all of whom were sharing in the loneliness of being away from home and family.

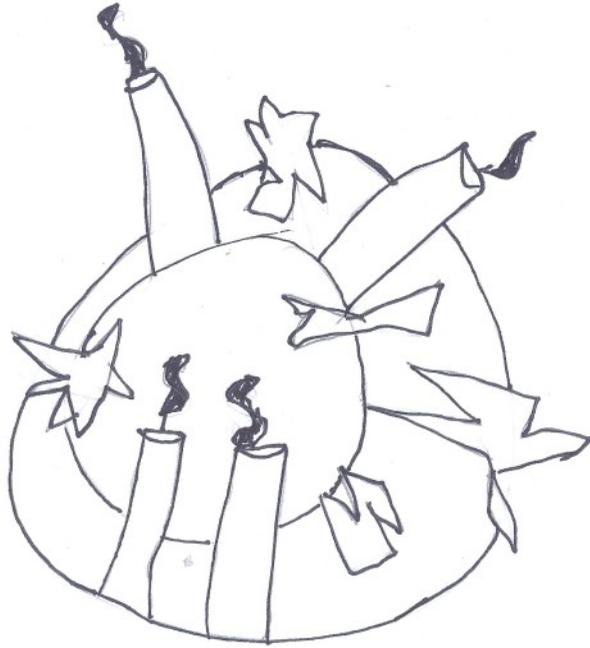
I do remember that, in this dark, cold, lonely place, these folks cared about each other enough to labor non-stop through Christmas Eve to prepare a Christmas dinner to rival any that any of us were missing. That Christmas Day, 400 lonely men and women became, for a day, a family.

Heavenly God, We pray for an awareness of Christ in the lives of our military. We pray for our military families dealing with the separation from their loved ones and for those whose loved ones have paid the ultimate sacrifice. Amen.



Tom Massey

Brooke Hicks, Age 12



Victoria Duffy, Age 7



Advent Scripture Readings

Date	Scripture
2-Dec	Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4; 3:[3b-6], 17-19
3-Dec	Habakkuk 1:5-11
4-Dec	Habakkuk 1:12—2:1
5-Dec	Habakkuk 2:5-14
6-Dec	Habakkuk 2:15-20
7-Dec	Habakkuk 3:1-7
8-Dec	Habakkuk 3:8-16
9-Dec	Esther 4:1-17
10-Dec	Esther 1:1-22
11-Dec	Esther 2:1-23
12-Dec	Esther 3:1-15
13-Dec	Esther 5:1-14

Date	Scripture
14-Dec	Esther 6:1-14
15-Dec	Esther 7:1—8:17
16-Dec	Isaiah 42:1-9
17-Dec	Isaiah 42:10-20
18-Dec	Isaiah 42:21-25
19-Dec	Isaiah 43:1-7
20-Dec	Isaiah 43:8-21
21-Dec	Isaiah 43:22-28
22-Dec	Isaiah 44:1-8
23-Dec	Matthew 1:18-25
24-Dec	Luke 2:1-14, [15-20]
25-Dec	Luke 2:8-20

Faith Practice will be on holiday break 12/16, 12/23, and 12/30, and will resume January 6.



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