



ALDERSGATE **2022** ADVENT DEVOTIONAL



"Sunset Serenity" by Rhonda Simonelli



Painting by Deepa Samuel

Nov. 27

THERE IS HOPE IN EVERY SEASON

“And God said, ‘Let there be light in the firmament of the heavens to separate the day from the night, and let them be for seasons, to serve as signs to mark sacred times, and days and years;’ and it was so.”

— Genesis 1:14

Seasons are reasons to sing glory to God. Each one has its own beautiful purpose to serve.

In all the changes, with a thankful heart, seek the presence of God. Let us enjoy these awesome gifts—summer, winter, rain, spring, and autumn—which God has beautifully created for us.

Seasons change as does everything else, but God remains the same yesterday, today, and forever. In sorrow, loss, joy, and happiness in all tranquilities of life all glory be to God. Everything that happens, happens at the time God chooses.

We all go through many seasons in our lives. Pray in every situation. All our difficult times will pass, and this deepens our faith. In the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon affirmed the seasons of joy and hardships, despair and peaks of honor. When we keep God at the center of our lives there is a purpose, and a refining of our hearts takes place. In the Book of John, God reminds us “In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” (16:33).

“To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under the heaven.” (Ecclesiastes 3:1).

— Deepa Samuel

Nov. 28

FALLING LEAVES

Psalms 1:1-6

It has been a beautiful October!

I—I’m sitting on the patio, nursing a cup of coffee and watching the leaves fall. Each one gently falling according to its own path, each one finding its own place on the ground.

Yes, it has been a beautiful October, with lush green leaves, having lived their lifetimes, each letting go of life, falling to cover the ground with their same shape, but now boasting their beautiful golden appearance.

This scene reminds me of our birth to death, a journey we all will take, each in our own way. On Christmas, our Lord’s birthday we celebrate, and on Easter, His Rebirth we also celebrate. Such it is with those leaves, green and tender at first and similar in shape yet, at season’s end beautifully changed to gold and red as they end their lives, gently falling to earth one by one.

Let us celebrate our Lord Jesus’ birth, our birth too, until that golden time of passage to our next life.

“The green leaves of spring and summer depict hope, renewal and

revival. Blazing yellow, orange and red leaves of fall represent the change of season. Ultimately, fallen leaves complete the circle of life with the final stages: decline and death.”

In Memoriam, my brother, Norm.

– Dick Edgett

Nov. 29

LO, I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS

“Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

– Matthew 28:20

Every year, a few days after Thanksgiving, we bring up three boxes from the basement. Our Christmas tree is put in its usual corner, waiting for the decorations. We untangle the strings of lights and are delighted to find that they all work. We try to remember whether we used the red or the silver ribbon garland last year, but we never remember. Everything always goes in the same place: the yarn angel hangs on the wall; the nativity set our family made with styrofoam balls, cloth and gold paint sits on the coffee table while the olive wood nativity set which we brought back from Jerusalem goes on top of the desk in the kitchen.

We choose our favorite ornaments: the cruise ship we bought when our family went on a cruise to celebrate our 50-year anniversary, the fisherman who looks like my grandfather, and, of

course, the silver clam shell ornament our son made in Sunday school. The angel looks a little bedraggled after sixty-five years but she still goes on the top of the tree. Everything looks beautiful.

Around the second week in January, it is time to pack up everything and the three cardboard boxes go back in the basement. But there is one thing that doesn't go back in the box—Jesus.

It is easy to feel very close to Jesus during the Advent and Christmas seasons with all the songs and all the decorations around us. But we, as Christians, know that Jesus is with us at any time and any place.

Thank you, Jesus, for your promise and assurance that you are with us “even to the end of the age.” Amen

– Charlotte Ridley

Nov. 30

TO BLESS AND SERVE

“God has given gifts to each of you from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Manage them well so that God’s generosity can flow through you.”

– 1 Peter 4:10

I love baking cookies, and while I make many different kinds, I’m told my chocolate chip cookies are everyone’s favorites. Through the years, I have often gifted friends and family with cookies. I’ve taken them to people who might not otherwise enjoy homemade cookies, mailed

them cross country to family in other states, donated them to bake sales, and dropped them off to neighbors. I find great happiness in sharing these treats.

Almost 20 years ago, our son and daughter-in-law began hosting a small family Christmas Cookie Swap. Everyone baked several dozen cookies to exchange, wore festive clothing, and enjoyed time together! Slowly, the Cookie Party began to grow. Games were added, including a Cookie Contest! There were two categories: “Most Tasty” and “Most Festive-Looking”. The cookies were judged by individuals who did not know who’d baked or decorated them. Winners’ names would go on a trophy! I was certain I was a shoo-in. Imagine my surprise when I did not win. And I have continued to not win for almost 15 years now.

While I was initially disappointed, I began considering the reason I bake cookies throughout the year, and especially at Christmas time. I enjoy it, and I enjoy sharing what I can with others. Jesus doesn’t care about a Cookie Contest, and in scripture, we’re reminded to use our gifts and abilities to bless and serve others. And maybe that even includes cookie making!

Lord, thank you for the gifts you bestow on us. Help us to use those gifts to serve you and those around us. And remind us, especially at this time of year, that what we give is not about recognition or acknowledgement, but about generosity. Amen

– Susan DeVincintis

Dec. 1

ALL IS CALM, ALL IS BRIGHT

“Peace, I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled. and do not let them be afraid.” – John 14:27 (NRSV)

A couple of years ago, I facilitated an Advent Study produced by Adam Hamilton entitled “Not a Silent Night.” The 5 sessions start at the Cross and go backwards in time to Jesus’ birth and offers what Mary, mother of our Savior, might have reflected on.

Reflection, memory, recollection... all terms that represent a blessing from God. Good memories often become better with time. That 6-inch fish I caught when I was 10 has grown to a foot. And I don’t think there is anything wrong with that. It brings joy and laughter as I recount the event and the listener rolls their eyes at my “fish story.” And bad memories, while never forgotten, mellow with time. You’ll never forget when that loved one died or that illness caused you so much pain or that accident that occurred that required months of rehab. But at some point, the event is well behind you in its effect on you and you have moved on. Life has become calm once again. Your soul is at peace. Your world is bright once again!

All is Calm; all is bright!! No one will convince me that God doesn’t want us to be blessed. Happy memories are part of this blessing. The dulling of

painful experiences is also a blessing.

I'll never forget how awesome it was for Becky and me to hold each other in a long loving embrace in the early years of our marriage. What a wonder that we found each other and became soulmates for life. My joy abounds!! All is calm, all is bright!

I'll never forget the day in May of 2003 that I almost lost my soulmate to a cerebral hemorrhage. But she LIVED and the horror of the weeks following her malady have faded significantly. I was blessed! I am blessed!! All is calm, all is bright!!

But it's important to know that the brightness of our lives has never really changed. Jesus was and still is our Lord. We still had each other. We still could perform ministry to glorify the Kingdom!! Almost 2000 years ago a Savior was born that put a perfectly wonderful purpose to our lives!! In that knowledge, we give thanks!! All is calm!! All is Bright!! Glory to God on high!! Amen!!

– Doug Hess

Dec. 2 **SMALL GROUPS**

"Do not be discouraged, for the Lord your GOD will be with you wherever you go." – Joshua 1:9

Small groups are familiar in many churches for faith and spiritual growth. They materialize in various sizes, usually by interest. Church-

affiliated groups such as grief healing, Al-anon and several self-improvement groups also meet and provide community for its members. But my type of group meets as individuals in different places. We associate via daily devotionals where we can pray for the individual/family and their need. Recently, a woman lost her job and was not able to find work due to her disability. When we prayed about it, a college course opened up so she could use her GOD given abilities to find employment.

Most of us are familiar with "Lassie" stories where the fictional dog saves people. In one instance, however, a dog alerted the neighbors that its mistress, who lived alone, had fallen. It had never been away from home, but somehow knew how to receive the attention required. The knowledge that many were praying sustained her. Alzheimer's disease is a tough one. People relate its negative effects on their loved one, but often the caregivers also need to be added to the prayer list. So, we pray for each other. Where my small group enters, it allows us to see individual difficulties and feelings of futility and offer prayer and acceptance of the Lord's answer, even if it's not always to our liking. It allows us to realize that people throughout many countries, cities and villages suffer similarly. Knowing that a large group of readers are sympathizing and placing a healing or thankful prayer is very positive and uplifting. Seeing the faith of the writer is a growth experience for the reader. PRAYER WORKS!

God's grace is sufficient for me.

Almighty God, Thank you for the people you place in our lives; those we pray for and those who pray for us. Help us to live as Christ taught us, loving God and our neighbor. Amen

– Paul Brown

Dec. 3

PEACE BE WITH YOU

"I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart! And the peace I give isn't fragile like the peace the world gives. So don't be troubled or afraid." – John 14:27

Snow softly falling. Still, starry nights. A mother's lullaby. Quiet instrumental music. A crackling fire. Warm bubble baths. Cozy blankets and warm hugs. The sounds of nature. Gently falling leaves. All of these sounds and images conjure up for us the feelings of peace and calm. When things aren't going quite right and the chaos of the day takes over, we look for the serenity of stillness and contentment. We all know the ideas of stress management; these techniques work. But, the peace the world provides is temporary. As Christians, we know that Advent brings us true peace, the Prince of Peace. This is the message of John 14:27. Jesus promises eternal peace to all believers in the midst of troubles. The spiritual peace that Jesus offers is a permanent gift to His followers. He knew that our worldly journey would not be easy, but

He overcame the world...for us! In the coming days of the holiday season when the cookies have to be baked, presents found, bought and wrapped, houses decorated, everyone's favorite foods prepared and people begin to sound and act like Scrooge, let's remember what the prophet Isaiah foretold, "For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6).

Heavenly Father, in the bustle of this most Holy season, may we remember with thanksgiving your gift to us, your perfect Son, and feel the peace that passes all understanding. Amen

– Debbie Lenau and Sandi Norris

Dec. 4

WALKING IN THE WINTER WONDERLAND

"The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps."

– Proverbs 9

I am attracted to people who love nature. I like to hear stories, look at pictures on Facebook and Instagram of where people go on interesting hikes and trails, near and far away. On my birthday this year, Mike, Ella and I climbed up a steep hill to Natty's Bumpo's Cave near Cooperstown, NY. We were up for the challenge of finding this hidden cave tucked into

the mountainside. This fall, Deepa and I have taken a few morning “walk and talks” on different trails right here in good old Greece, NY. We enjoy marveling at the colorful trees, leaves at our feet while breathing in the cold air, talking about life, church, and Costco (in no particular order☺).

I have tried the last few winters to plan some Sunday walks in the woods after church with my family. When we walk, we are together, connecting (phones are in our coats), and I pause to think about how wonderful and precious these moments really are. Luke will be graduating from high school this coming year, and it doesn't really seem possible that this big milestone is almost here.

Sometimes at night, we take short walks as Iris likes to see how our neighbors decorate their homes with colorful lights and fun holiday inflatables. We have “I Wonder Conversations” under the starry skies. Advent is a time for coming together and to find out what makes this season the most beautiful of the year. It is a time when we get ready to celebrate Jesus' birth.

For me, walking is a way to slow down, hear God's voice, and feel His presence in my life. It helps me to reflect on the many blessings in my life.

*In winter woods a herd of snowflakes
is guided by the shepherd breeze*

*And one fir tree anticipates the
blessing it will soon receive*

*And listens for it, stretches every
limb toward the snow-bright paths-
primed*

*And growing out, against the wind,
To greet the very night of the divine.*

- Rainer Maria Rilke

May your Christmas be filled with many winter wonders, beautiful times with family & friends, and filled with God's divine presence.

- Rhonda Simonelli

Dec. 5

BREATHE AGAIN

*“They looked to Him and were
radiant; their faces shall never blush
for shame or be confused.”*

- Psalm 34:5 (AMP)

Christmas and the birth of our Savior was intended to wash us white as snow. He clothed us with dignity and sound mind. We no longer are slaves to being good enough.

God is so good. He delights in us. I love to remember His goodness early in the morning, listening to worship and reading through Psalms. Have you ever noticed when you're worried, you can tense up and stop breathing? But when you exercise and move your body, you take natural deep breaths?

I am convinced God does not want his children to become tense and worried. He wants to heal us and cleanse us from iniquity with praise.

Negative thinking is not beaten with more thinking, there's something about a Voice that triumphs over my negative thoughts.

I believe that is why He inhabits the praises of his people (Psalm 22:3). Heaven is a movement and busy place! Praise God!

– Shannon Sloan

Dec. 6

COUNTING YOUR BLESSINGS

“Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!” – Psalm 118:29

Growing up, one of my family’s favorite holiday movies was Irving Berlin’s *White Christmas*. There was a song written by Berlin and sung in the movie by Bing Crosby called *Counting My Blessings*. In the final stanza the song writer gave this advice: “If you’re worried and you can’t sleep, just count your blessings instead of sheep. And you’ll fall asleep counting your blessings.” He was right; I’ve found that an “attitude of gratitude” is in itself a blessing. But I don’t just end the day counting my blessings and thanking God (sometimes I fall asleep too soon!) so I also begin the day thanking the Lord for the blessings in my life, large and small. Sitting and praying and expressing my gratitude for all that God has given me brings a calmness and serenity that prepares me for the day ahead, knowing that whatever the day might bring, I am grateful for God’s love.

Oh, God, thank You, for we know You

hold all things in the palm of Your hand; let us rest there calmed by Your love. This we ask in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen

– Maureen Whalen

Dec. 7

WHATEVER YOU ARE . . . BE A GOOD ONE

“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

– *Philippians 4:13*

Back in 2016, when I was 11 years old, my family moved away from my childhood home that I loved. This is the same year that my new baby sister was born. It was a year full of changes, full of surprises for me, and it was probably one of the most challenging times in my life. I didn’t want to move. I didn’t care about having a bigger house. I didn’t want to go to a new school. I didn’t want to make new friends. I just wanted things to stay the same, because I was happy. My bedroom faced the street where my best friend lived. Now as I look back on those days, he felt more like a brother to me. It was a comfort level between us that was more of family than just neighborhood friends. We are still friends to this day, but it isn’t quite the same.

I started 6th grade in the Hilton School district. I tried out for the Hilton Select Basketball program and made the “A” team. Not that I really

Dec. 8

RETIREMENT

"I look to the hills, where does my help come from? My help will come from the Lord who made heaven and earth."

– Psalm 121:1, 2

knew what that meant at the time, but it did help me make some friends, but in a competitive environment. I didn't have a best buddy, but I did have something to do most days after school and my passion for basketball developed even more. My parents bought a basketball hoop for outdoors, as a "housewarming" gift for me, and I was outside in all weather, just playing basketball. I played basketball all the time. Shooting hoops every day was my substitute for playing with my best friend. And it became my passion. It was how I overcame my sadness about moving. It was how I developed the grit to overcome challenges in life.

Now that I'm a senior in High School, I have a few good friends that I enjoy spending time with, and naturally, they play basketball as well. We have fun together, and most days, I forget about how unhappy I was when I first moved here. I used Abraham Lincoln's famous line for my senior yearbook quote, "Whatever you are . . . Be a Good One." I try to be one of the good ones, who does the right thing and helps others.

Life can be difficult, but it can also be good. Do the best you can every day, develop and pursue a passion in life, know that change can be ok, even good sometimes, and with strength from God and some prayers, you can overcome whatever it is that is bringing you down and live a happy life.

Hope you have a very Merry Christmas!

– Luke Simonelli

Since retirement, 6 years ago, I have found so much joy in the quiet peacefulness of my new life. While working and raising our three children, who were in multiple activities, it was a non-stop adventure. I went from one activity to the next, never stopping or slowing down. As I approached retirement, I feared I would be unable to adjust. Boy was I wrong!

I cherish my alone time. I have the privilege of watching my grandkids a few times a week and being part of their growth. My husband and I spend time outside with year-round hiking. This has brought me an appreciation for every season. I feel closest to God when I am outdoors. I love my reading time and even my TV time. I am blessed to still have my amazing parents and wonderful lifelong friends. I certainly don't miss the craziness of my old life! "All is Calm, all is Bright" is what I now am blessed to have.

This does not mean you must retire to have peace and calmness in your life. Nor does it mean that my life is stress free without any problems. But by slowing down and practicing gratitude and appreciation for each day, it has given me a new perspective and made all the difference.

May we all slow down each day, taking

time for our many blessings—not just during Advent, but every day.

– Karen Rice

Dec. 9

TAKE COMFORT IN HIS LOVE

“God does not have favorites.”

– Romans 2:11

It can be challenging to be the sibling of a person with a disability. Mike was sick a lot as a young child, and needed lots of special attention, therapies and assistance. My daughter Alicia would say to me “I know Mike is your favorite child”, and I would laugh and say “Yes, he is, but you are my favorite daughter”. In all honesty, I love my children the same, and I tried very hard to make sure each one felt special. I’m sure that there were times when one child got more attention than the other, but I did my best to not play favorites. I think that is how it is with our heavenly Father. While there may be time when each of us may need some ‘special attention,’ God loves each of us the same. No favorites. We each are equally loved by Him. My children can take comfort that I will always love them regardless of what they do (or don’t/can’t do). I can also take comfort knowing that my God will always love me, just as He loves all His children.

Dear Lord, thank you for loving me always in both my good moments

and when I’ve failed. I pray all God’s children can feel this same love! Amen

– Sue Zorn

Dec. 10

TAKING FLIGHT

John 5:24-30

My father was a great school-teacher. And one of the best lessons he taught me was, “If you have a goal you want to achieve, you have to prepare for it.”

I had the long-standing goal of becoming an airplane pilot. So, in preparation for achieving my goal, I hired a flight instructor to give me flying lessons. He told me to always follow the pre-flight check list, the flight plan, and never fly lower than five hundred feet above the ground unless you’re taking off, landing, or crop dusting. I violated that rule and paid the price. I had a mid-air collision with high powered electrical cables, ruined a brand-new Grumman American AA-5 airplane, and almost lost my life. Sadly, I never achieved my goal of becoming a licensed pilot.

I have another goal. After I die, I want God to resurrect me, give me a brand-new body and let me live with Him forever in heaven. So, in preparation for achieving that goal, I have enlisted the services of the best teacher of all time, Jesus, the Son of God. As far as I can determine, he is the only person ever to achieve

this goal. So, I've read and re-read everything he ever said.

Since he's already charted the way, I'm doing my best to straighten up and fly right. After all, we only get one shot at this, and he's got the best flight plan I've ever seen! So, every year during Advent, I re-read his instructions. If I've deviated from his instructions, I make any necessary course corrections. I want to be ready for his second flight to this planet.

He promises that when he comes back, he'll round up everyone, living or dead, who has been waiting for his arrival. He'll give us all new bodies and then fly us back to heaven so we can live with him there, forever. Happily, this is one goal I plan to achieve. Come, Lord Jesus, Come!

Heavenly Father, I believe in Jesus, and in the One who sent him. Thank you for the joy of passing from death to life. Amen

— David U. Jones

Dec. 11 **TREASURED MEMORIES**

"This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it."

— Psalm 118:24

I have wonderful memories of Christmas when I was growing up! I treasure those memories.

I loved it when we would all pile into

our family station wagon and drive around the neighborhood looking at all of the beautiful lights and decorations.

We could not wait to get our Christmas tree. We always had a live tree, and when we brought it inside, the house was filled with that wonderful pine fragrance. We decorated the tree as a family, making garland out of freshly popped popcorn and cranberries.

I love Christmas carols, especially when we would all gather around the piano to sing, while my brother John played the piano, accompanied by my mom on the violin.

There was always something delicious coming out of the oven. My mom's gingerbread cookies were a favorite at Christmas time, because you could mold the dough into little gingerbread men.

Winter was so much fun when we were kids! We prayed for snow.

We had a great big skating rink in our backyard, with flood lights for night time ice skating and hockey games.

Ellison Park was our favorite place to go sledding. Like most kids we loved to make snowmen and snow angels, and then come inside for hot chocolate and freshly baked cookies right out of the oven, with a big fire burning in the fireplace.

We always sat around our large dining room table for our meals. Mom would have a centerpiece with tall candles burning, even at breakfast.



Cooke Family Winter Scene



There were also trips downtown to ride the Midtown Plaza monorail and visit Sibley's Toyland and Magic Corridor.

Christmas wasn't about presents, it was about time spent with family and friends. But most of all, it was about honoring the birth of our precious Christ child! After all, that is the reason for the season.

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for blessing us with so many treasured memories, and for the peace, promise and love that Christmas brings. Amen

– Frances (Louie) VanKouwenberg

Dec. 12

ALL IS CALM, ALL IS BRIGHT

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your request to God.”

– Philippians 4:6

Have you ever wondered how you would react to a call from your doctor with bad news about your health? I know there are some of you who have received such news. Were you calm and at peace or were you overcome by fear and trepidation?

Well, I had such a call a few weeks ago. The doctor called to tell me that the C/T scan showed that I had a mass in my colon. My experience was calm and peaceful, knowing the only place that calm could come from was God.

If I had thought about this scenario ahead of time, I'm sure I would have felt anxiety about my future.

When something happens to a loved one or someone you know, don't you feel anxious for them? I know I do, and then that's when I start praying. I am forever grateful for all the prayers I received from everybody. I firmly believe they had everything to do with my outcome. The surgery was a success and the pathology report came back clear of any other cancer, but I will be tested every 3 months for a while to be sure.

It can be very difficult sometimes to put our complete trust in God. I know that I have experienced times when I haven't. Praise God when we do.

Heavenly Father help us to trust you in all circumstances. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen

– Larry Scrivens

Dec. 13

THE WONDROUS GIFT

“As for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago. From the days of eternity.”

– Micah 5:2

When I heard of the theme, *All is Calm, All is Bright*, I immediately thought of the words to a favorite Christmas hymn “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” The song gives

a picture of calmness in the town but also refers to everlasting light. I love the verse that says, “How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given, so God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven.” This hymn is evangelical and invitational, asking Jesus to come to us, abide with us.

Faith is such a wonderful gift and we receive it in various ways, some dramatic, but for most of it is a gradual unfolding of understanding and acceptance over the years, but at some in our lives we can sing, “I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back, no turning back!”

I also thought of a bookmark that my daughter brought back years ago after a visit to France. It said, “The eternal one is God and He has placed His light within us.”

I wish you joy in your journey. May you carry the light of Christ within you at all times!

Love in Christ,

Joyce Farrokh

Dec. 14

GOD IN HUMAN FORM

*“...and they will call Him Immanuel,
which means God with us.”*

– Matthew 1:23

When I worked at a Meal Ministry in the inner city, I would give a “rallying cry” prayer over the crew: “Let them see Jesus in us and let us see

Jesus in them.” Mirroring the qualities of Jesus, while not easy in practice all the time, is at least easy in theory. We need to be more loving, Joy-filled, Peaceful, patient etc. But how do we see Jesus in the people whom we are called to serve?

When God gave me that prayer, He'd been showing me the more “nitty-gritty” images from the stories we hear at this time of year, throughout Jesus’ earthly ministry, and the Holy Week stories.

Take away the angelic proclamations and Jesus was the “surprise,” unplanned fetus in the womb of an unwed young teen-aged girl. He was then the about-to-deliver fetus of that young girl begging for lodging and help! Soon after, He became the baby with the young couple at the border, begging for safe passage and asylum, desperately fearing for the life of their child if they don't flee. Then, years later, He roamed around as a homeless vagrant, frequently, directly telling people: “I'm eating and sleeping at your house tonight!” And it gets “worse” if you forget the Truths that we know. Toward the end of His short, earthly life, He was imprisoned (on made-up charges) and, essentially, on death row before being executed.

During this Holiday season, and throughout the new year, let's look past the angel halos and bright starlight. Let's work toward seeing Jesus in the faces of people who find themselves in the circumstances He found Himself in, and treat them accordingly. Then, as we see Jesus in them, they (and

God) will see Jesus reflected in us!

Merry Christmas and a Prosperous New Year!

O, Sovereign Lord, who walked among us in human form, open our eyes to see You in every human being that crosses our path. And give us the humility and Strength to reflect You to them and serve them as You would. Amen

– Sharon Bartter

Dec. 15 **WE ARE FAMILY**

“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 . . . 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 1:1-3, 14 NIV

ANCESTRY – the tracing of one’s family or ethnic descent, is a popular topic these days. As the commemoration of Christ’s Bethlehem birth draws near, and because of an ongoing study of The Book of Hebrews, I’ve been meditating about Christ’s ancestry. I’ve been gently reminded that there was NO time that Christ was NOT present! Duh.

Christ was ALREADY ‘born,’ in existence, invisible, incarnate, already

Present with God the Father and Holy Spirit in ETERNITY—*waaaaaaay* before the creation of the universe and creation of Adam!! The Godhead’s Covenant of Mercy and Redemption for us was already formed and has continued in place as man has evolved (and continued to sin!) on earth. Christ’s Bethlehem birth—a sacrifice which would end at the Cross—was when He entered the world as human to stand in the gap for us before Holy God, was already ordained. (John 3:16).

Dear Holy Father, Son and Holy Spirit: We Praise and worship you for WHO you are – THANK YOU for your gift of salvation through Jesus – allowing us to be part of YOUR family. Amen

– Chitie Edgett

Dec. 16 **BETTY’S FINAL CHRISTMAS**

“I came that you would have Life, and have it more abundantly.”

– John 10:10

Betty was downright giddy! I had found, in the hospital gift shop, white-chocolate, peppermint covered pretzels. She now had a treat that she could wrap for her great-grandchildren to open and enjoy. It had been her last concern—something the little ones could open. Everyone else would understand, but the little ones.

What they all understood was that this

would be Betty's final earthly Christmas. It would, in fact, be her final week. The trips down the hall to her storage unit for more decorations, and once a week to the Cancer unit for Calcium infusions were all she had the energy for anymore. But all that didn't matter now. She was giggling like a schoolgirl at the sight of 3 packages of white-chocolate, peppermint covered pretzels!

You see, Betty had her faith. She was not sad or scared. She knew that eternal life, and her beloved husband—who was already there—awaited her. That's not to say she was “happy” about dying but she was at peace enough to be happy about other things—like Christmas decorations and peppermint covered pretzels!

As Betty settled back in her treatment chair, worn out from giggling, we heard the bright, happy version of Brahms Lullaby that rang out from the Birthing Center down the hall. Betty's earthly life was fading away but another life was just beginning! We both applauded the announcement. As long as you know The Lord, both the beginning and “earthly” ending of life can be Bright and Peaceful! (Betty had her Christmas at home that year, entering Hospice on December 27—her 92nd Birthday—and going Home to Glory on January 2nd).

May your Holidays be Calm and Bright—no matter your Circumstances!
O, Mighty God, give us the Strength and Peace to take every part of our lives, the pleasant and the “not-so-

pleasant,” from beginning to earthly end, as a Christmas gift from You, to open and enjoy! Amen

– Sharon Bartter

Dec. 17

A STRING OF LIGHTS

“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?” – Luke 15:4

Have you ever taken out a string of lights to put on your Christmas tree, plugged it in only to find some bulbs are lit and others not? I remember that happening when I was young. My dad wouldn't throw the string out but go through each bulb, put a new bulb in to see if it would be the one to light up the others. At last he would find the right one, put the string on and the lights shone brightly on our tree.

This reminds me of the Parable of the Lost Sheep. Jesus tells us that a man will leave his flock of sheep to find one that has strayed from the flock and is lost. Just as my dad searched for the bulb to light up the rest of the string, Jesus searches for each one of us who are lost. He came down from heaven at Christmas to find us, to save us, to give us a new life and show us how to shine for Him. A new life of forgiveness, of love and one that is eternal. He seeks us when we stray and shows us the way back to Him. Jesus is Emmanuel—God with us—not only

at Christmastime but every day. Let your light and the love of Jesus shine brightly in all that you do.

Jesus, Thank you for coming down from heaven, seeking me when I was lost and for giving me a new life. I pray that others will see your light in me. Amen

– Debbie Simm

Dec. 18 **GOD'S GIFT OF INSPIRATION**

Exodus 3:10-12

When I was a little girl, I was painfully shy. My shyness was so severe that it continued into my high school years. When a teacher assigned an oral report, I chose to take a “0” for my grade instead of speaking in front of the class. Even after becoming a Christian at age 25, I was afraid to speak in public. Yet my heart was overflowing with the desire to be a witness of God’s love.

Soon after David and I married, it became clear to me that a pastor’s wife would probably need to speak in public from time to time. David assured me that with a bit of training I would be able to accomplish this. Cautiously, I enrolled in a Lay Speaker class that was offered through the UM Church. We were taught how to read scripture, write a message and speak well in public. When the time came for my first oral presentation, I was terrified. Thankfully, God steadied my nerves

and enabled me to speak what was in my heart. God inspired the words and gave me the grace to accomplish the difficult task of public speaking.

At Christmas, we celebrate the arrival of our Lord on Earth as a baby. Leaving His beautiful heavenly home, He came to this messy and dangerous planet. That was the ultimate difficult task and required ultimate sacrifice. Yet, He came anyway. Just as God helped me with my fear of public speaking, He helped Jesus redeem us from evil. God calls us to accomplish difficult tasks, but He never expects us to do it alone. From cradle to grave, God’s spirit lives in us, guiding us along the path that leads to heaven.

Heavenly Father, in the busyness of the Advent season, we are listening to your voice. When You ask us to do something difficult, let us step out in faith. With joy we prepare our hearts to receive your inspiration. Amen

– Mary Lou Jones

Dec. 19 **HAWAIIAN CHRISTMAS**

“Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” – 1 Thessalonians 5:18

I still remember the empty, numb feeling. I was 22 years old. My father had died a few months ago and now my mother and grandmother (her mother) had just died one day apart. The pain was even too deep to

cry. I felt so very alone. Christmas was only a couple months away. I didn't think I could stand the pain of being with the rest of my family that Christmas. So, I decided that Bob and I should go to Hawaii for Christmas. If we were there, it would be different and I wouldn't have to think about all that I had lost. The invitations from my brother and sister-in-law to spend Christmas with them was turned down as was an invitation from other relatives.

Hawaii was beautiful and warm, but Christmas didn't seem like Christmas. The emptiness wasn't healed by a trip to what should be warm, wonderful place. In fact, I felt emptier. While I didn't say anything at the time, I knew I had made a mistake. I think my absence made their Christmas time emptier too. I have wished ever since that I had spent the time with the family I had left. I read a quote years later which has always stuck with me – "no matter what you have lost, you always have something left." I wish I had taken time to treasure what I had left. Instead, for some of the family, I slowly drifted apart from them because we lived a long distance away and we never really got back together again.

I recently saw a picture of the *Peanuts* cartoon characters Snoopy and Woodstock sitting on top of a doghouse. The caption read "When we lose someone we love, we must learn not to live without them, but to live with the love they left behind." How true that is. While it is true

year-round, I think it is especially meaningful at Christmas time.

Dear God, Help us to always treasure the love that we have for You and each other. Amen

– Janet Winter

Dec. 20

MARY SAYS YES TO GOD

Luke 1:26-38

The Virgin Mary found herself pregnant and unmarried. Was she elated to find out she was with child? Was she terrified, ashamed and shocked? Did she feel like an instant outcast? Did it help knowing she would give birth to the Child of God?

Mary led a wholesome, obedient life as a devoted believer in God. She grew up hearing stories about the promised Messiah. But news of this pregnancy surely left her wrestling with feelings of shame, ridicule and judgment as her belly grew and the pregnancy became apparent. I wonder, if Roe vs. Wade had been around back then, would she have chosen to end her pregnancy? It was, after all, her body. Was God asking Mary to be a surrogate mother? This thing that God was doing in her was making her life difficult. It required much preparation on her part.

Thankfully for us, she endured the negative feedback from her neighbors and carried the pregnancy to full term.

Mary allowed herself to be the vessel that would allow Jesus to be born. Her trust and faithfulness made possible our celebration of Christmas and our resurrection.

Advent reminds us that it is now our turn to be vessels of God's love and to prepare our hearts for His arrival. Christmas is the celebration of His birth!

Our loving heavenly Father, as we prepare our homes and hearts for Christmas, may we be ever thankful of the sacrifice Mary made on our behalf. Help us to live so close to You that we, like Mary, may be vessels of your love working to reach the world with the Good News of salvation through Jesus' birth. In His name we pray. Amen

– Mary Lou Jones

Dec. 21 **STARLIGHT, STAR BRIGHT**

*“The people that walked in darkness
have seen a great light: they that dwell
in the land of the shadow of death,
upon them hath the light shined.”*

– Isaiah 9:2

I love stars. The darker the outside is, the brighter they shine. One night when I was driving alone, I took a wrong exit and found myself lost in total darkness! There were no street signs, no streetlights. I was a little scared. I came out of the car to look for a way back onto the highway in

a seemingly long, quiet darkness. I couldn't even see my feet or where I was going.

When I first saw the light of a star coming out of a thick cloud, how relieved I was! How much I wanted to stay with it and walk with it for comfort and assurance! Soon, the clouds passed and the stars and the moon illuminated the whole sky. I started seeing my feet, surroundings and where I was walking.

Our life can be like that where Jesus is the light (1 John 1:5). When a star in the east appeared to the wise men, they already knew it is His star (Matthew 2:2), and they followed it by faith, not knowing where it would take them. We all go through difficult times: not knowing our future, losing our loved ones, facing troubles in relationships, finance, health, persecution and even facing difficulty in our own spiritual walk. Without Jesus, we are prone to stumble where there is no light. But when we walk in Jesus' light, He will guide with goodness and forgiveness, full of mercy and truth, hope, love, and wisdom. How calmly and confidently we can stay in a quiet place where we find a refuge in the light of Jesus through faith. Jesus is always with us like the starlight always above even a thick cloud that overshadows our surroundings, guiding our way.

Dear Heavenly Father, this Christmas and always, illuminate us with your light, that we may come together as one and shine brightly to the world and bring you glory! In Jesus' name. Amen

– Kaori Winter

Dec. 22
**A MUDDY LITTLE
CHRISTMAS
(DUCK THE TURTLE)**

One of my favorite things about Christmastime is snuggling up by a warm heat lamp with a plate of leafy greens and some dried earthworms, watching the gently falling snow outside. I love the toastie feeling on my shell, and to be honest the earthworms are really tasty. I don't understand why Brian and Kaori never want to try them...though I think Kaori actually thought about it once.

Unfortunately, in Rochester, we rarely have a white Christmas. Even if snow is on the ground the day before, it somehow seems to melt. I mean, it's not exactly Florida. But still, we hope for it every year. Snowball fights, making turtles in the snow. And that's the thing about faith, we anxiously await the fulfillment of our hope. Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. Like Santa Claus. I put out a plate of cookies every year, and though they disappear every year, I still can't figure out how he gets down the narrow chimney way and out the glass doors of our fireplace insert unnoticed. I asked Brian about it once, but he just shrugged and walked away. I have a suspicion Brian may be eating the cookies, but I can't prove it. Still, miraculously the presents are there on Christmas Day.

But the most important gift of all is the gift of Jesus! So if it snows, let snow,

let it snow, let it snow. But if it doesn't, have yourself a muddy little Christmas!

Dear God, may this year's Christmas be white. Preferably 3 to 4 inches. Not enough snow so that we have to do a lot of shoveling, but enough for snowmen and snowball fights. Nevertheless, your will be done. But most of all, let us by faith receive and treasure the gift of your Son, Jesus, in our hearts. Amen

– Duck the Turtle



Dec. 23
PREPARATION

“And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.” – Matthew 2:12

Successfully receiving a baby into one's life requires a willingness to prepare for it. It also requires an accommodating spirit. Finances, schedules, and habits will change. Worshiping Jesus may cause one's life to take a new direction. It did for the Magi. It did for Joseph and Mary.

When Joseph and Mary prepared to

Dec. 24

ALL IS BRIGHT

"I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life."

— John 9:12

receive Jesus into their lives, they had to re-think their family finances, adjust their schedules, rearrange their living accommodations, and change their daily routines. And once Jesus arrived, they even had to flee to another country because of wicked political leaders.

Today, the same is true for anyone who receives Christ into their lives. Inviting Christ into one's life will likely change how one uses financial resources, time, and the direction one takes in life. It may even influence who and what we vote for in our political arenas. Our priorities, our character, and our sincerity are revealed in all those areas.

Advent Season is a perfect time to re-evaluate the use of our time, our money, our schedules, and our daily habits. We are all headed for an accountability appointment with God. It may be easy to avoid accountability in today's American culture, but no one can avoid being held accountable by God.

Anyone who wants to go to heaven must pass God's entrance requirement. Not everyone is going to get in. I think it is mighty loving and gracious of God to give us this time to prepare for our personal day of judgement. And the more we prepare, the greater the celebration can be!

Loving God, please come to me and live in my heart, soul, mind, and body. I will make whatever accommodations you need. I believe in you and will follow your leadership. Amen

— David U. Jones

Every year I look forward to the calm beauty of Christmastime. Festive decorations line the streets everywhere we go, the lights are beautifully strung across houses and in restaurants and stores. Amidst the hustle and bustle of the Christmas season, to me there's nothing like kicking my feet up on the sofa and relaxing by the Christmas tree. I love to turn off the room lights and watch the colors glow throughout the room. One might say that I'm lazy for not taking the tree down immediately after Christmas. In truth, in 2020 during the pandemic, we didn't take it down at all! Kaori and I plugged it in for some "Christmas Cheer" whenever we felt down. It's just that it saddens me somehow to take it down.

The lights displayed at Christmas are a reminder of the light of Christ and the great love that God has shown us. I am constantly reminded of that old, old story that has been rehearsed countless times since that first Christmas long ago. It was sung to the shepherds by angels, and now it is sung to us through the scriptures. The eternal Son of God—the light of the world and the Word of God by whom all things were made (John 1:1-3; Colossians 1:16, 17)—came to us as a helpless earthly child, born in Bethlehem, wrapped in swaddling clothes, and lying in a

manger. He rested his earthly life in human hands.

Jesus our Savior went through every stage of life from birth to adulthood and tread every path he asks us to tread. The greatest gift of Christmas was not merely a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, but a Savior who went before us, who long before us experienced the trials and tribulations of human life, who walks with us, who comforts us, who bore our sin and shame on the cross, who understands our pain and our sorrow, who will never leave us nor forsake us, and who conquered the grave. Because He lives, we shall live. So its true, I'm sad when the tree and the lights come down. But unlike the Christmas lights we hang each year, the light of Christ that shines in our hearts will never be extinguished.

Heavenly Father, may we shine the light of Jesus brightly to a sin darkened world. May we be calmed and comforted in your presence in every tribulation. May we be steady in our purpose to glorify your name. In Jesus name. Amen

– Brian Winter

Dec. 25 **CHRIST IS BORN**

Merry Christmas! Christ is born! This morning, you and your family will gather around the Christmas tree and open gifts. Very exciting! I hope Santa has brought all

the gifts that you wanted to get.

Are you done opening all the boxes? Did you open the gift box from God? No? You didn't see it? Go and check. You will find a box. It is not from Santa. It is from God. It is not wrapped with fancy paper. It has no gift bow on it either.

Yes! It is from God. Open it. What's in the box? Yes! It is Baby Jesus. The best gift for you!

You know today is Jesus' birthday. So, He should get birthday gifts, right? But He gives a gift to us instead. What's His gift for you? His life! The best gift anyone can ever give!

God so loved the world (us – you and me and everyone) that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life (John 3:16).

*Joy to the world,
the Lord is come!*

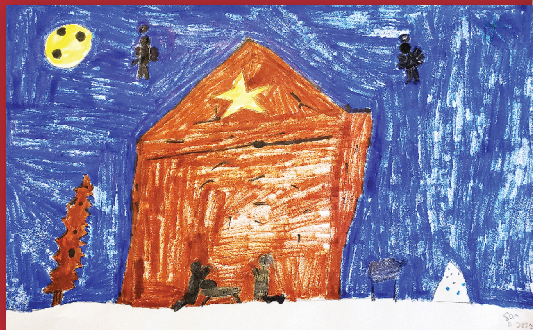
*Let earth receive her King;
let every heart prepare him room,
and heaven and nature sing,
and heaven and nature sing,
and heaven, and heaven,
and nature sing.*

The shepherds came to celebrate the birth of the Son of God. The three Wise Men came to worship Him. Let us join them in celebrating the birth of Jesus.

Christ is born! He is the Lord, the Messiah and the King. Let us give thanks and praise to God!

– Pastor Sung Ho

ADVENT ART!



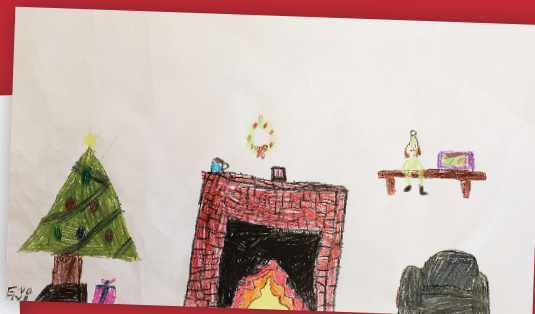
Sam Pfund, Age 11, "The Birth"



Libby Pfund, Age 8, "Everything to do on Christmas"



Nolan Troiano, Age 8



Evelyn Troiano, Age 10

It's Christmas time
We love getting presents
But the best thing of all
Is Jesus's presence

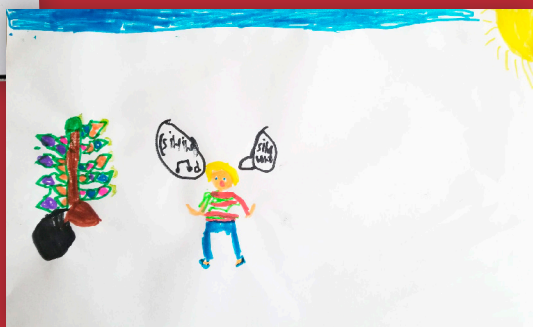
One thing I love about Christmas
Is when we all get together on
Christmas morning and open presents.



Jack Simm, Age 9, "One thing I love about Christmas is when all get together on Christmas morning and open presents...but the best thing of all is Jesus's presence"



Emma Simm, Age 8



Anderson Donovan, Age 10, "Singing"



Shaylee Crandall, Age 11, "The Holy Spirit, Happy Christmas!"



Ella Simonelli, Age 16, "All is Calm"



Noah Paulick, Age 7



Lilly Fisher, Age 9, "I like to spend time with my family."



Adriana Mendola, Age 11



Theodore Muoio, Age 5, "Manger in the Snow"



Iris Simonelli, Age 5, "I like to wake up everyone early to open presents!"

GINGERBREAD COOKIES

Frances Cooke, submitted by Louie VanKouwenberg

3 c sifted flour

1 ½ tsp baking powder

¼ tsp salt

1 ½ tsp cinnamon

½ tsp ginger

1 stick melted margarine

½ c molasses

½ c brown sugar

1 tsp warm water

1 egg, beaten

Sift dry ingredients. Combine melted margarine, molasses, brown sugar, warm water and egg. Mix well. Add dry ingredients and stir until the flour disappears. Mold into shapes or use cookie cutters. Bake on a greased cookie sheet at 350 degrees for approximately 10 minutes.

“Dough is non-sticky, perfect for little hands to mold into snowmen, bunny, or whatever comes to mind.” – Frances Cooke

*Thank you everyone who contributed to the making
of this devotional book!*

Without you, this would not have been possible.

Merry Christmas!

Debra

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