

THE JOURNEY TO BETHLEHEM



Trinity Presbyterian Church
2009 Advent Reflections

~A Collection from Years Past~

**On our way to Bethlehem,
let us take a few minutes each day
to ponder the Word of God in our hearts.**

Thank you to the members of our Trinity family
who shared their reflections in this booklet between
1990 and 2009

DECEMBER 1 (2004)

A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God..."

- Isaiah 40:3

As we begin this Advent season it is safe to say that "preparation" is on all of our minds. We are searching for holiday decorations, presents or making our final travel plans. During this season, more than any other, many of us struggle to balance our practical responsibilities with our need to take time to prepare ourselves spiritually for the coming of our newborn son, Jesus Christ.

This will be our daughter's first Christmas with her new family. What a joyous time in our home. As many of you know, Grace came to us this past March. You welcomed her into our Trinity family in April. Our son, William celebrates his "gotcha" date on December 15th. Four years ago, Tom and I left St. Louis in one of our typical ice storms, spent an unexpected night in Atlanta due to our delayed St. Louis flight and then were united with our son in Guatemala. The outpouring of support our family has received from our Trinity family always gives us reason to pause and appreciate the love of those around us.

Since I was a child I can remember my father reading the Upper Room daily devotional guide. My father provides our family with an annual subscription as one of our Christmas presents. Whenever I pick up the Upper Room, William runs to me and says, "let's read Jesus." Reading these short stories with my son brings a much deeper meaning to each of them as I search to answer questions that only a four year old asks of his dad.

As we prepare ourselves this holiday season, a time of family traditions for all of us, take a moment and reflect upon the gifts we have all received from our parents, our children and those around us. As we strive to support those around us, if we pause for just a moment, we soon realize that the support we give others has blessed us ten-fold.

-- Terry Crow

DECEMBER 2 (1991)

Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, he answered them, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, "Lo, here it is!" or "There!" for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you."

- Luke 17:20-21

This passage brings to mind many people in my life who have exemplified the Kingdom of God in the midst of us. The following is a story of one dear friend.

John Bagby was an elderly man who was a member of my church in Topeka. He lived modestly in his own home with his cat, Snowy. John was a much-beloved member of our congregation. Although he had no living relatives, he was seldom alone. His home was always open to his many friends and to anyone who needed help. John loved to cook, and often entertained his friends with delicious meals and delightful conversation.

John's circle of friends went far beyond our immediate congregation. He assisted many persons and families who had fallen through the cracks of the system. He received numerous community service awards. Although some took advantage of his kindness and generosity, most people were eternally grateful.

John suffered terribly with emphysema for the last twenty years or more of his life. He literally had to fight for every breath. But his concern was never for himself – only for others. He lived to help other people. He even preferred to leave his house unlocked when he was away, because someone might need to use his phone.

During the last few years of his life, John was continually in and out of the hospital. He could no longer go outside at night, because the night air was too difficult to breathe. It was especially then that John's friends came to him. His home was full of well-wishers on Christmas Eve, his birthday, and many other occasions. He seldom mentioned the daily suffering he had to endure, and still did what he could to help those in need.

John died in December 1987, two days before Christmas. I am very grateful for having known him. He gave a little of the Kingdom to everyone he met by freely giving of himself.

Advent is a time for rejoicing in the Kingdom of God in our midst. This Kingdom was freely given to us. It is up to us to pass it on to everyone we meet.

--Bob Henderson

DECEMBER 3 (2004)

He shall judge the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples, they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

- Isaiah 2:4

As we wait each Advent for the promised arrival of the Christ child, we also wait for this just state of affairs foretold by Isaiah to come to pass. As Jesus' birth gives us hope for victory over sin and death, so Isaiah's words give hope for justice, and an end to war. But, while we count down excitedly to Christmas Eve, we seem in no particular hurry for this time described by Isaiah to come; rather we simply seem content to leave it all up to God.

However, I find that God has given us the tools in the Bible to make Isaiah's future our present rather than something for which we must wait. From Moses' recording of God's simple commandment that we shall not kill, to so much of Jesus' teachings as recorded in the Gospels – be peacemakers, do unto others as you would have them do unto you – the tools are there for us to pick up and use.

Now, I am certainly no Biblical scholar. In fact, I was only baptized three years ago, and confess to not yet having read the complete Old Testament. I am sure that there are interpretations aplenty, conflicting passages to be resolved, and the myriad translation possibilities, etc. that those who are scholars could use to construct pro-war, pro-injustice God, Jesus and Bible, or at least find some loophole or excuse for “this” war or “that” injustice, but it would not ring true for me. The Christian messages that inspire me and burn inside me are peace and love and justice, and life everlasting in the presence of God. To say that humanity, including many who call themselves Christian, has not gotten the same message would be an understatement of criminal proportions.

Advent presents for me an opportunity to share the incredible story of Jesus from the beginning, and sharing the story gives me hope that others will listen and hear, and that Isaiah's vision would be realized. May the peace of Christ be with you.

-- David Nelson

DECEMBER 4 (2004)

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

- *Isaiah 11:1-3a*

This passage is traditionally read as the foretelling of the coming of the messiah. It also reminds us of the need that Christians have felt all through history to be connected to a bigger and more ancient story – that of the saints in Jesus' own family tree.

Every two years or so I travel to India and visit my mother for a few weeks. During these trips I always set aside one full day to visit the shrine of St. Thomas. It is an old shrine built on top of a small mountain barely 10 miles from the home where I grew up. St. Thomas is recognized in this part of India as the apostle who came to share the good news of the gospel during the first century. The shrine of St. Thomas is a particularly beloved pilgrimage destination for Christians in southern India. During the annual festival of the shrine thousands come to climb the mount and pray at the shrine dedicated to their forefather in faith.

There are no roads that one can take to reach the top of this mount. The faithful are expected to climb through some rough terrain to reach the shrine. On a clear day it takes about two to three hours of steep climbing to reach the top.

It is not an easy climb on muggy hot summer days when the rocks are slippery after the rains. But this is when I usually visit India. Yet my visits to this shrine have always been a time I deeply cherish. A time to reflect on my own faith journey. For each time I climb this mount I cannot but think of all my fathers and mothers in faith who came to this very place before me. I can imagine them climbing these rocks as young children coming here for the first time with their parents. And later on as adults taking their children for the climb as Alice and I did a few years ago with our three daughters. They would have come here through all the many twists and turns of their own faith journey. In times of peace and in times of war, in times of good harvest and in times of scarcity. In times of loss and pain and in times of joy and happiness. It is a place where I yearn to connect to a story bigger than my own.

--George Philips

DECEMBER 5 (2004)

He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

- Isaiah 40:11

Everyone who knows me knows that I collect sheep from all over the world. Russia, Guatemala, Czechoslovakia, China, England, Walgreen's, Bubble Gum machines, from everywhere. Friends, young and old, whoever they are, whatever they're doing, if they see a sheep – they think of me! This also includes every poem, song or scripture about sheep, and so this particular assignment had to be mine.

From the beginning of all memory for me, I have perceived myself and have been perceived as the "alpha ewe" – an assertive and active participant and guide in this life's journey. Most times, the direction appeared clear, God leading me, the mother sheep, along the sure path.

My path was stopped cold when Fred's final days were upon me. The assuredness and comfort gone, I didn't know how, or if I could find my way, much less lead or help others find theirs. I had helped others to die – but this was Fred, my Fred. We had been together a lifetime. I didn't have much memory of being without him. I cried. I prayed, "I cannot do this!"

Then, an epiphany, I didn't have to do it. God held me tight in this bosom and the flock took over! Everyone camped in, every space was taken, shifts for medicine, shopping, cooking, and telephoning. Frank Sinatra playing for Fred, children singing to him, tender caring for him, laughing and crying with him. Fred's dying was just plain Holy. God carried me through every moment, every breath.

Now I see clearly, what I could not see before. At any given time in my life, I am also a lamb, and if the mother sheep for a time, I am the *humble* alpha ewe. This advent season, I celebrate and praise God for the superb flock!

--Do Kirk

DECEMBER 6 (1994)

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

- I Peter 2:9-10

CHOSEN! Oh, no. What am I going to do with this responsibility?

Throughout my life I have always wanted to be chosen, to fit in, to be a part of the group, to be somebody. When Don talked in his sermon about the agony of not being chosen to dance (the worst fear of a teenager – being a wallflower), he reminded me of how sensitive I was (and am still) to that process of choosing.

Now what do I do when I am a part of God's chosen race? What can I possibly do to fulfill my "duty" – how can I make a difference? I am not the evangelist, I am not at ease talking about my faith to others – that is too personal for me to share. I hate to ask for money – I even have difficulty collecting on IOUs for rummage sale items! For me it is easier to do a task myself than to have to ask for volunteers. How can I proclaim to others all the mighty acts of God? What a dilemma!

When visiting a Methodist church in Pennsylvania this fall, I was a part of the congregation's dedication of the church school teachers and the guest minister was preaching to that theme. The minister indicated that each of us has been given the gift of influence. I thought, now that is a gift and a responsibility that I could possibly handle. It doesn't require me to make phone calls or speeches! How many people have given me their gift of influence? My mother, who passed away over three years ago, continues to influence me. Many times I don't want to acknowledge what traits/attitudes she gave me and sometimes I want to reject those I never wanted. But her steady, quiet, dependable style is probably one of her best traits and I thank her for that. My life is full of wonderful people who have influenced me including many of the Trinity family. Thank you Don, Kim, Bettie, Virginia, Genny, etc., etc., etc.

So it's my turn, or has been all along. If I live my life while continuing to understand and grow with my faith, I can be an influence to others. I can make a difference. This Advent season, may each of us consider our influence and use it to join hands with others. Use God's marvelous light. Forevermore. Our children are counting on us.

--Joanne Roman

DECEMBER 7 (2004)

Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.

- James 5:7-8

When my brother and I were growing up, waiting patiently was quite a challenge, especially as we anticipated our family's traditions during Advent. Putting up the tree was a sure sign that Christmas wasn't far off, and our excitement made the waiting seem interminable. We just couldn't wait! But of course we did. We tried to be patient as we waited to do our part in decorating the Christmas tree. After securing the tree in its stand, our dad tested all the strings of colored lights. Then he carefully strung the lights over the branches, patiently arranging and rearranging the bulbs so that every bough was illuminated and the strands were all plugged in, their various cords carefully hidden. And finally he added the crowning glory – the star!

I loved the history of our star. Dad had bought it in 1945 at a corner drugstore, near his boyhood home above his father's store in North St. Louis. The price was scrawled on the back of the box: 35 cents. The once-shiny, sparkly tin star was hollow, with a space for Christmas light bulb to fit inside and twinkle through star-shaped holes pierced in the metal. Beautiful blue "jewels" adorned the five points and the center of the star.

Dad's placement of the star at the top of the tree marked the end of our waiting. No longer were my brother and I expected to be patient! The appointed time had arrived at last, and we eagerly chose ornaments to hang on the tree. Throughout my childhood, we had different kinds of Christmas trees placed in various spots in the house, with and without tinsel, strung with different types of lights, but the star was always in its place. As the metal weakened with use and the blue jewels loosened, Dad carefully repaired it and it continued to grace our tree.

My father's example taught me to be patient as I waited for my turn to add decorations to the tree. Year after year, during that difficult time of waiting, I came to appreciate the significance of the placement of the star, not only as the signal that Dad's work was done and we children could begin our decorating, but also as a tangible expression of his steadfast love for us and his unflinching patience with us. Now that Dad is gone, I treasure that beautiful, battered star even more, as a link to him and a reminder of the bright star that shone over Bethlehem, heralding the birth of Jesus, our Bright Morning Star, sent to be the Light of the World.

-- Jan Schulte-Glad

DECEMBER 8 (1992)

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.

- Isaiah 9:2

Oh, God, what darkness this year!

Between the nations, within the nations,
between the governments, within the governments,
between the races, within the races,
between the churches, within the churches,
between families, within families,
between persons, within a person...

Sometimes we live

as though the darkness will overcome the light,
as though our dimly burning wicks will be put out,
as though the star will not come out this year,
as though the people who walked in darkness had never seen a great light.

Who is this Promised One?

He is the Light of the World,
the Bright and Morning Star,
our hope in darkness,
our very present hope....

For we are the people

who have seen a great light.

--Ann Weems

DECEMBER 9 (2004)

Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, he answered them, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Lo, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you."

- Luke 17: 20-21

A wise man once told me, "Money is not the only way to tithe to your God." In that moment, the burden of guilt of not dropping in a check or a bill lifted from my shoulders as I watched the offering plate pass before me each successive Sunday.

I did not choose a profession that compensates its workers with cash. As a teacher, even in a generous school district, money is tight. So, I tithe what I feel I am able. Some money goes in the offering plate. Some food goes in the food drives and food pantries. Some time is given helping distribute food to the needy. Some knowledge is given to parents in the hopes of helping them understand their child's developmental phase and unique abilities. Some time is given coordinating events that help children grow and stretch and fly. Some "gently used" clothing and toys are donated to local charities. Listening ears and a sympathetic heart are given to friends who are suffering infertility issues and loss of loved ones as we did. The greatest gift God has given me is the ability to help children learn, so I teach. I empower children to believe in themselves, to trust others, to understand and develop their talents so that they may live the fullest lives possible. These are the ways in which I give back to my God. I tithe the gifts, the skills, the love that God has blessed me with. For I know of no better way to honor and love my God than by returning what I have been given.

When the offering plate returns to the altar, I pray that God understands and is accepting of my offerings...and I pray that tomorrow I might give a little more.

"The gifts of God, for the people of God."

-- Rick Hasler

DECEMBER 10 (2007)

The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.

- Isaiah 11:6

This scripture really speaks to me about all that I have been taught in life...no matter what color, gender, beliefs, or abilities, all are welcome and shall be included. I grew up in Nashville, Tennessee and lived there until I was 12, when we moved back to St. Louis. I was then enrolled in University City Schools and it was quite a culture shock. We lived in a fairly affluent neighborhood in Nashville, and there wasn't much cultural diversity. As a kid, I never knew the difference until beginning 6th Grade at Brittany Woods Middle School.

I became the minority in a population of many African American students. The only difference I found between myself and the other students was that I was the new kid and needed to find my way.

Growing up, I distinctly remember classmates with many differences; one with leukemia, one who needed assistance from a walker to get around school, and also one who had a tragic accident with a gun and eventually died. I still remember all of their names and faces, like it was yesterday. I remember raising money for Tim's family when he was in the ICU, helping Annie through the cafeteria, and naming my very bald Cabbage Patch doll after Eddie. All are welcome...no worries of differences.

Children are born innocent. They do not choose to be born with HIV or cerebral palsy, or to be white or black, to be Arab or Jewish, to be gay or straight, to be homeless or live in a mansion. I look at the world today and wish we all could go back to the beginning...where nothing mattered but being loved, nourished, and clothed. The little child to lead them, as the scripture reads, can be all of us. We all have the ability to be the little child...we can all choose how we lead. This Christmas season, celebrate the differences in all of us, because that is what gives us all such a good story to tell.

--Becca Courtney

DECEMBER 11 (2004)

And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Don't 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."

- Luke 1:28-31

As I follow the path of my personal faith journey, I often ask myself where and when I feel the presence of God in my life. My answer varies. Sometimes I find God in the serenity of nature such as watching the fall of the first winter snow during the Christmas season. But most often I feel the presence of God while in the presence of my children. When they say something that turns a frown into a smile, when they reach out to hold my hand, when I realize the love shared is unconditional, and as night falls and I tuck them into bed over "pillow talk" and they say, "tell us a story about when you were a kid." During the advent season I tell stories of my childhood Christmas memories and family traditions. I remember the tradition of gathering all the family on Christmas Eve to trim the tree together. My mother would play the piano as we all sang songs of the season. Then the evening would close with my father reading us "The Night Before Christmas." As an adolescent, I tell the story of searching for the gifts prior to Christmas, of my brother and me climbing to the highest closet to find the gifts Mom thought she had so carefully hidden. As a college student, I tell the stories of sharing the joy of the season with family and friends at our annual Christmas Eve party. None of these stories include the "true meaning" of Christmas, even though I know how important it was to my mother. She insisted we remember the "true story" and focused on giving rather than receiving. As I look back I realize while sharing the joy of the season with family and friends, the Lord was with us as he was with Mary. God was indeed present throughout my life.

When I became a parent myself, it became extremely important to me that my children know more than just the excitement and anticipation of what Santa may leave under the tree or in the stockings so carefully hung above the chimney, but know the "true meaning" of Christmas. We began to create our own family traditions. Each year we decide what we can do as a family for someone else during the season of giving. We always deliver an advent bag to one of our congregation's shut-ins. We bake Christmas cookies together, decorate the house, and create a major adventure in the hunt for the perfect tree. Most important, the family service at Trinity on Christmas Eve became our tradition. When I sit in the pew on Christmas Eve, as the true Christmas story unfolds, I feel compelled to put my arms around my children and to hold my husband's hand. This is the ultimate moment . . . I feel the presence of God in my life. Maybe I experience similar feelings to Mary's when the angel told her she would deliver the Baby Jesus into the world. I may be fearful of what tomorrow holds for me as she must have been. But I am reminded that I too am in favor with God, as long as the Lord is with me I must not be afraid. I say a silent prayer thanking God for my many blessings . . . my journey, my family, my friends, and especially the special gift of my children. Unnoticed, I look down at my children in the pew, I smile quietly to myself and I shed a small tear of joy and serenity, as I am reminded of the day I brought them into the world. God was definitely present in my life on those days as he was with Mary. We mothers must be kindred spirits with Mary. We too brought God's children into the world, our own special miracles, who if we lead them to the "true meaning" they too will feel the presence of God in their lives.

-- Jennifer Higginbotham

DECEMBER 12 (1990)

Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing now it springs forth, so you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

- Isaiah 43: 18-19

When our eldest daughter was two years old, she and I spent a week in Iowa with my husband's aunt while he had a week of special training in a lab in Minnesota. That week was early in the Advent season, and we visited the educational building where Aunt Wilma taught Sunday School. Linda saw a primitive crèche there with a doll from the playhouse in a bed of hay. She began laughing and said, "Funny." Being a first time uptight mother, I explained that that was baby Jesus and not funny! We completed our tour of the building and came back by the crèche on our way out. Being a quick learner and wanting to please her mother, Linda went back to the crèche, stopped, and said, "Not funny." Then she paused, searching for the correct work from her limited speaking vocabulary. "Just Right!"

Linda saw an old doll, but began to perceive a new symbolic meaning for it. She could accept the possibility that the new meaning was "Just right." Isn't that the essence of Advent? Each year we are reminded again that God, through the gift of Christ, makes available new possibilities for our lives and our world. What seems like something old and tattered and soiled (an attitude, a concept, a relationship, a habit) may be transformed through God's grace into a new thing that is just right.

--Norma Vavra

DECEMBER 13 (2004)

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy."

- Luke 1:41-44

It's Elizabeth's question that strikes me. Humbled and awestruck, she asks, "Why has this happened to me?"—why do I have the honor of being drawn into this miraculous story? She is amazed that she is a direct participant in the unfolding of God's plan. This is God's reminder to us: we are ALL participants in the greatest story ever told and should share the wonder that Elizabeth expresses. This is not happening to the few—it is a story involving all of us. This is not a story from long, long ago; but is drawing us in even now.

And isn't this the case for most of us? We are surprised and amazed when we ourselves have moments of being filled with the Holy Spirit; moments of experiencing the presence of God. Elizabeth and the baby in her womb respond joyously and with anticipation of the fulfillment of God's promise. Can we be like them and recognize Christ's presence in our lives?

We should leap for joy, too, because, as both Mary and Elizabeth know, all things are possible with God. God's will overrides that which seems "logical" or "natural"...and miracles occur. My prayer for all of us is that, this Advent, we can celebrate our central role in God's plan, slow down enough to recognize the Holy Spirit working within us, and make way for miracles to happen.

--Liz Nelson

DECEMBER 14 (2003)

And I say unto you: "Ask and it shall be given you; Seek and ye shall find; Knock and it shall be opened unto you."

- Luke 11:19

At this Advent season, my memory returns to 1939 when I was 14 years old. It was Christmas season and the patients on the children's orthopedic ward at the local hospital were busy making decorations. Garlands of red and green paper chains hid the drab, large windows of the ward. Each of the 10 patients were given permission to decorate his bed as he wished. A Christmas tree was placed in the corner of the room and decorated by wheelchair patients assisted by student nurses and volunteers. Nativity statues were assembled on a nearby table. The children, many who had been patients for many years were busy learning their 'parts' for their annual Christmas play to be performed soon.

I was a relative newcomer to the ward this Christmas season, having been a patient a mere five months. The long-term treatment plan to heal my crushed vertebrae (caused by a bicycle-truck accident the previous July) consisted of bed rest on a Bradford frame. This rectangular frame was made of metal pipe with a bend in the center; heavy canvas was laced to this pipe. In this position the head and feet were lower than the rest of the body. Several other children were also confined to frames like mine. To encourage independence we were taught to feed ourselves and observe our surroundings with a mirror!!

Following my once a month spinal x-rays, my doctors held an evaluation conference with my parents. Much later it was revealed that my doctor always gave my parents very discouraging news of my medical progress. My prognosis was that I probably would never walk, but if I did, would have a severe limp! My mother, the optimist, would return to my bedside following the doctors' conferences and tell me how much I was improving, and gave me encouragement to continue being patient and follow the treatment a little longer.

As a young child, my sister and I were brought to Sunday School. The Bible verses and lessons learned were invaluable at this time of crises. I remember Luke 11:19, and had learned that God does not give everything that his children want, but he gives the good things that they need. Prayers ...Prayers ...Prayers of praise and thankfulness to God that my injuries were not as severe as some of my ward-mates, and prayers for the medical skill of our doctors and for the survival for all of us.

After eight months of immobility on the Bradford frame, I was fitted for a steel and leather body brace, and allowed to sit up in a wheel chair - and then learned to walk again, by pushing my wheel chair. Each leg was heavy and I had to mentally learn to place one foot in front of each other. Then two months later (a total of ten months in the hospital), I was allowed to go home, sleeping on the Bradford frame at night for the next three years, and wearing my daytime brace for the next four years.

Later, at my discharge physical exam after watching me walk back and forth, my doctor asked, "Who cured you?" I answered with a big smile, "Why you did, Dr. K....." Dr. K.....'s head and eyes looked up to the ceiling, and said, "I had nothing to do with it!!"

PRAISE BE TO GOD!!!

--Roberta Gill Middelkamp

DECEMBER 15 (1992)

Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them."

- Luke 1:67-68

Advent by its very name is a time of anticipation...of waiting! For me, as a child, the waiting included a great deal of excitement which was enhanced by the arrival of the Sears Christmas catalog, the appearance of Santa during our local holiday parade the Saturday after Thanksgiving, the life-size crèche on the lawn of the public library, Advent calendars and wreaths and songs celebrating the Root of Jesse.

The culmination of those days of Advent was comfortingly consistent for me. My anticipation was rewarded on Christmas Eve with traditions of the tree being lit and the bubble lights doing their magic one more time, and Mom serving her special cookie assortment while we waited to go to Midnight Mass. One small gift from my parents was opened while we contested who had been most creative in decorating the angel cut-out cookies. Then, we enjoyed a brisk walk to church often made warmer by a new pair of gloves and, once, white rabbit fur earmuffs! Pine, poinsettia, and powerful glo-o-o-o-ree-ah's harkened the angels' and my joy at Jesus' birth. Afterwards, we hurried home to bed not wanting to spoil our chances with Santa. We never did!

As a child, I was "favorably looked upon," as the prophet declared. Now, as an adult and the mother of two, my perspectives during Advent have changed. There is a strong sense of responsibility to fulfill and even nurture the anticipation of Advent in my own children. Mixed with this sometimes frenetic, though mostly joyous, activity is the awareness that I am trying to preserve something which for me was "comfortable consistent".

Doing that, however, seems more and more complicated. Hallmark sends "Happy Holiday Greetings" from storefront displays long before Halloween, and I am not ready! Satellite video communications brings the starving children of Somalia into my kitchen as I linger over past holiday editions of Bon Appetit. The juxtaposition of their swollen bellies and my visions of sugarplums and a traditional Christmas dinner is disconcerting. And then, there is the guilt and concern over the children in my own neighborhood. Their anticipation is different...their joys are different...the latest list of lay-offs did not include their father...no one noticed that they wore the wrong color to school and they made it home safely!

I understand now that Advent is a time of preparation more than one of waiting. In anticipation of Christ's birth let us look favorably on all people, and in so doing find ways to provide something "comfortingly consistent" for all of us...PEACE.

--Barb Rand

DECEMBER 16 (1994)

Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people: to you is born this day in the City of David, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

- Luke 2:9-11

This verse always conjures up rich memories of Christmases long past, of carols, of other Biblical narratives of Jesus’ birth, of visits to grandparents and friends during the holidays; and interestingly, of a more modern Christmas story – the Charlie Brown Christmas.

Many of us are familiar with this cartoon tale. Charlie and his friends decide to have a Christmas play, and Charlie is given the important task of selecting the appropriate Christmas tree. As usual, Charlie flubs it up. Instead of bringing back a large flashy Christmas tree, per instruction, he finds meaning in a pathetic looking little tree that cannot even stand up to the weight of one ornament. Downhearted, Charlie turns away from the jeers of his friend to seek some resolution of his inner turmoil concerning the real meaning of Christmas. As he casts about trying to understand how he could have been so wrong, Linus comes to the rescue, reciting this verse. Miraculously, the problems are rectified; Charlie leaves with renewed vigor to decorate his tree. He understands that the real meaning of Christmas is in caring, in trust, and most importantly, in hope – not in tinsel. For all of his apparent naivete, through his searches, Charlie has come closer to comprehending the real meaning of Christmas than any of his more worldly-wise friends.

So how can this children’s story possibly be pertinent to us? I think that it points to the central theme expressed by the angels to those shepherds so many nights ago. In the midst of despair and loneliness, there is hope – the “glad tidings of great joy”. In Charlie’s case, his hope and trust were in what he saw in a tree that had been cast out by all others. For us it is perhaps in the light of hope for a society fraught with crime, poverty, and helplessness. Transformation of Charlie’s tree was a result of his actions based on that hope, replacing cynicism with trust. For me, the central message of Christmas is that we can do the same.

--Ken Kelton

DECEMBER 17 (2003)

For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou has prepared in the presence of all peoples.

- Luke 2: 30-31 --Luke 2: 30-31

This passage in Luke recounts the story of Simeon during Jesus' first trip to the temple. Simeon was promised to see the Lord Christ during his lifetime; a promise God kept. But the more important promise was, and is, the promise to ALL people of the new beginning that leads to Easter and Salvation.

The Advent season is a time of hope being born. We see one another in a new brighter light even though the din of the season can be a little overwhelming. A hope that allows us to give more freely, help others less fortunate than ourselves, cherish our friends and family, see everyone as God's children and slow enough to reflect and rejoice. This hope leads to Christmas and God's revealed promise. God's revealed promise of Jesus' birth, His continued life, and our Salvation.

If only we can take some time out of our lives to carry the true meaning of the Advent and Christmas season with us throughout the year and spread the good news. The news of Hope being born and Salvation revealed. We can be a disciple everyday of the year and have peace in our hearts.

--Bill Cahoon

DECEMBER 18 (2007)

...And they shall name him Emmanuel, which means God is with us.

- Matthew 1:23b

When have I known the presence of God? I have had many days where God seemed absent – even as hunger and poverty and suffering remained far from my experience.

My gift of an ordinary life is underwhelming at times; my connection with God unremarkable. Then there are those moments – the heartbreaking, joyful, quiet moments – when I am held in God’s embrace, and it is familiar, and I am home.

I have known the presence of God within the most significant and simplistic events of my life – from a milestone as great as the birth of my son to a morning walk outdoors. Over time, I realized God is with us each day – in all moments. The closer I feel to Him, the more extraordinary my life becomes. There is beauty and responsibility in this light that guides me. One cannot know God’s love without being called to share it.

The following quote by Albert Einstein is posted in my office. It is a source of inspiration:

“Strange is our situation here upon earth. Each of us comes for a short visit, not knowing why, yet sometimes seeming to divine a purpose. From the standpoint of daily life, however, there is one thing I do know: that we are here for the sake of each other, above all, for those upon whose smile and well-being our own happiness depends, and also for the countless unknown souls with whose fate we are connected by a bond of sympathy. Many times a day I realize how much my own outer and inner life is built upon the labors of others, both living and dead, and how earnestly I must exert myself in order to give in return as much as I have received and am still receiving.”

--Sharon Christopher

DECEMBER 19 (1993)

Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

- Matthew 2:11b

One Christmas Eve when I was a child, I was curled up on my brother's lap pretending to be asleep. There was a large cedar tree by the fireplace beautifully decorated by the loving hands of my parents and siblings. Out of the corner of my eye I saw presents wrapped in white tissue paper, tied with red ribbons, being placed under the tree by my family. At that time, my suspicions were confirmed – Santa did not come down the chimney with gifts! From the prayers of thanks offered by my mother and father, I knew we were celebrating the birth of Jesus. I have attended church all of my life, but only since I joined Trinity in 1962 have I enjoyed the true meaning of Advent. Needless to say, Advent has enriched my life to understand the joys and alleluias of this season.

There were no decorations in the godforsaken stable where Jesus lay in the crudely built manger – only a star overhead, which had guided the wise men with their gifts of gold, representing testimony of esteem that it occupied; frankincense, which when burned gives off a delightful odor; myrrh, used as an ingredient in oil for anointing.

At that time the world was a mess, wildly imperfect, just as it is today. But that did not prevent God's love for us from bursting through in Bethlehem. What was perfect was the miracle 2,000 years ago, and the love of God that continues to burst through the chaos of human imperfections.

Father, as I prepare for your Son's birthday, help me look for your grace and blessing in everything. Give me a joyful heart and please reflect it on my face and in my voice. Amen.

--Maxine Story

DECEMBER 20 (2005)

Joseph also went from the town of Zarareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.

-Luke 2: 4-6

Stories about Jesus' birth in Bethlehem always remind me of setting up our nativity scene when I was a child. In my earliest memories, we only had one nativity scene. But a few years later we were given an antique hand-carved and painted wooden set from Italy. This very special nativity set had been in my family for quite sometime, most recently with my great Aunt Alice in Kansas City. She decided that it was time to pass it down, and gave it to my parents.

The first Christmas after receiving the Italian nativity set and for many thereafter, I took it as my personal responsibility to set up the nativity scene. I thought and thought about what would be the most appropriate and prominent place for our new nativity set, and finally settled on the mantle in the living room. This mantel was fairly low, and easily viewable, even for me, making it a great location.

After spending a great deal of time setting and re-setting the figures in a variety of configurations, I decided that I needed a few more props to make it just right. I fashioned a wooden structure from twigs and glue to have a building to place the baby Jesus into. I also made a star from cardboard and tinfoil. In the end I was quite proud of my nativity scene and all the extra work I put into making it more realistic.

After leaving home for college, the event of Christmas in my home changed quite a bit. My parents drifted apart, eventually separating and then divorcing. Christmas for me became much more an event with my girlfriend's family as a result. Eventually, the girlfriend became my wife, and her family's Christmas' became mine as well. My wife and I bought a house and a couple of years later had our first child. Three years later we had our second daughter.

With two children, the true magic of Christmas genuinely re-entered my life. We of course had to get a tree and lights and decorations. We also had to have a nativity scene. The next time I was at my father's house, I dug through my family's old Christmas stuff. I found the familiar box containing the Italian nativity scene, just like I remembered it. I took the box home, gathered our two children and opened the box. In addition to all the special figures, my wooden building and tinfoil star were still there.

Now, every year, I look forward to setting up this very special nativity scene with my children. It is once again one of the most special moments of the holidays for me.

--Chris Carman

DECEMBER 21 (2007)

So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!

- Luke 11:9-13

This is one of my favorite scriptures, promises from God...

Ask and it will be given

Search and you will find

Knock and the door will be opened for you.

To know that it is ok to ask, to question, to doubt and know that God and his disciples (you and I) will be there to provide answers...and while we are asking, we are probably searching, God and his disciples (remember, you and I) will take your hand and help you find...and knock and the door will be opened for you, WOW, we are all welcomed into the family of faith, we are all welcomed with open arms, no matter what, and we are embraced forever and a day.

So what does this mean to us during Advent, during this time of preparation, during this time of expectation...God's time and God's way helps to explain these promises in the expectation of the Prince of Peace as well as the many expectations, the asking, the searching and the knocking in our own lives.

Mary asked "why me" and she was told she was in "God's favor". This is not what Mary expected. Joseph searched for a place for Mary to deliver this special baby, and what he found was not what he expected. The door Mary and Joseph knocked on, the door that opened and what they found inside and who they were embraced by was not what they expected.

Promises from God, answers given, being found and doors opening to all – what awesome gifts of unconditional love....

I believe these promises are there for you and I...I asked why ... why the tremors, why the tumor, why the chronic pain, God answered me through my family. Through my family's constant comfort, shared fears and tears, laughter, responsibility they didn't ask for, and steadfast love.

I searched for answers and I found a group of kids searching for their faith, but teaching me about accepting what I cannot change, about finding the simple pleasures & abundance in life, & knowing their handprints will forever be on my heart.

I knocked and the door of acceptance and unconditional love has been shown to me, through this wonderful family of faith. No matter how much I wiggle and shake the pew, no matter if I carry a cane, no matter if I jumble my words I am still welcome, I am still embraced and held forever and a day – this door is Trinity – my faith home.

My challenge to you...Carry these promises with you always – you never know when you might be asking, searching or knocking...and listen closely to your heart for someone else's questions, for someone else's searching and knocking...be there for all, welcoming them with open arms and steadfast love.

Peace and Merry Christmas,

--Kim Merritt

DECEMBER 22 (2004)

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

Joel, a shepherd, called to his friends: "Look up at the sky. Don't the stars seem close tonight?"

"And extra white," Micah the youngest shepherd said, "like bits of newly washed cloth."

Old Zachariah, head tilted back, said, "Could I be seeing the shape of a spirit up there, or of an angel?"

"I hate winter." Micah pulled his cloak tight. "But this black season brings out the brightest skies."

"The stars are almost speaking to us," Joel said.

"Do you really hear them? Zachariah pushed his head scarf back and turned his ear skyward.

"You're imagining. We've been out here too long. The sky is just the sky." Oren scowled. "Maybe a little extra starry over there towards Bethlehem. Nothing more."

"To me the brightness feels as if it's singing." Micah shivered.

"You're mixing it all up," Oren answered.

"No, I hear the song, the wind, the leaves – it's full of peace," Joel said.

"Why not follow that song we're hearing?" Micah asked.

"The song you hear?" Oren reached for a blanket in his pack. "I'd rather make camp."

Joe said, "Let's go – the three of us at least. Come, Oren, or don't."

Micah wrapped himself tightly and set out, followed by Joel and Zachariah. grumbling, Oren watched them leave. Suddenly he hollered, "Wait, wait for me. It's too loud and bright to stay here alone.

-- Susan Rava

DECEMBER 23 (1991)

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger.

- Luke 2:15-16

"Let us go over to Bethlehem" made me think of how many times my brother, my sister, and I went with our parents to their hometown in Alabama for Christmas.

In 1941, in spite of Pearl Harbor, which had happened just a few days into Advent, we still went to Huntsville. We listened to war news while we packed trunks with presents to go under the tree. We had outgrown the need for bicycles and roller skates that we had taken when we were younger. The trunks went to the station by Railway Express the morning of the 21st of December and we left on the late train that evening.

We arrived near noon the next day in time for my mother to have a meeting with the "government men" who paid her for the part of her farm that was taken over for the Redstone Arsenal (where poisonous gas was made during the war, and where Von Braun and the other rocket scientists came to work after the war).

As usual, we stayed at my grandmother's house. That was where we had our Christmas tree and where we opened presents on Christmas morning. Our visit was a short one; but all of the other relatives invited us to have meals with them too. We loved the stuffed ham, turkey, and the green beans cooked all day with bacon and served with mayonnaise, biscuits with gravy, corn bread. For dessert there would be ambrosia of fresh coconut and oranges, coconut cake, caramel cake, and light and dark fruit cakes.

The unusual event of that Christmas Day was the wedding of my first cousin, John Sullivan Yarbrough to Ada Belle Bullard (he is the son of my Aunt Ada Mai, and, being a little older, was the one who helped us shoot fireworks each Christmas and lead the effort to put out the fires started by small hot air balloons). Jessie Ann Yarbrough and Edgar O'Connor Rand were the only attendants. There are lots of double first names in my family, and in Alabama they are always used!

--Milt Rand

DECEMBER 24 (2005)

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

- Isaiah 9:6

These stirring words from Isaiah are odd somehow – all those majestic titles bestowed on a child. As it does so often, our faith turns our worldly expectations upside down.

Sandy Norkaitis gave me this passage as a birthday present. Christmas Eve is not only the night of angels and shepherds and mangers; it is also *my* birthday. Forgive me, then, if -- especially this Christmas -- I think not of sons but of daughters being born. So often my father retold the story of my birth: the automobile accident a month before I was born that nearly killed my mother; concern over my breech birth; joy that at last a daughter had been acquired by extended families on both sides. I was never quite sure whether my dad was thrilled to have a daughter for her own (my) sake or because as the only girl after a long string of boy cousins I inherited my grandmother's cedar chest. For whatever reason, it gave me a special niche.

When I was a child a Christmas Eve birthday was a mixed blessing. As I've grown old, though, I've realized that it's not for every birthday that people take holidays and decorate their houses. And every year it is a time for wonder and love – not a bad birthday to have after all.

With the birth of our first grandchild in August, I relived the excitement of new life arriving in our midst. Again, it was a daughter who was so warmly cradled, cuddled, and cooed over. Even when you recognize that several other children are born every day, this one seems so special. “Does she have 10 fingers and 10 toes” is soon replaced by “She has Laura's eyes. Do you think that's Uncle Joe's chin?” We certainly realized again how quickly a tiny body comes to control the world around her!

I think that what this verse from Isaiah says most clearly is that it is in this very fleshy reality that our glory is to be found. Everlasting majesty exists in life that is new, that is relational (a son or daughter), that is wise, that is invested in peace. The Isaiah passage seems above all to be a family tale, one that tells us where true authority for our lives lies.

How amazing is the sense of joy, wonder and hope that accompanies the arrival of a child in a family. How cosmic is that joy, wonder and hope when the child who comes is the Prince of Peace.

-- Ann Fischer

DECEMBER 25 (2009)

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

- John 1:14

The Word becoming flesh is the great mystery of the Nativity. God becoming human and living with us is the good news of the Incarnation. And just to make we get the point, John follows the announcement that the Word became flesh by saying that we have beheld his glory, a glory that is full of grace and truth. It all sounds so wonderful, so holy, so profound. And after considering the last two years of my family's life, it also sounds so wrong.

After two serious bouts with cancer, decline and death from Alzheimer's, and assorted illnesses and broken bones, I am hard pressed to admit that there is much grace or truth to becoming flesh. Jesus was right when he remarked to his drowsy disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane: the flesh is weak. The flesh is weak! And to further make the point, Jesus' own flesh was beaten, broken and killed on the cross. For me, the greater mystery is no that the Word became flesh, but why the Word would ever consider becoming flesh. Why did God wrap Jesus in such weak and feeble flesh?

The answer, I have discovered, is that that is how we know that God is with us and for us. In Jesus' human weakness we see a reflection of our own weakness. In Jesus' human brokenness we see a reflection of our own human brokenness. And in the community called by him that surrounds us in our time of weakness and brokenness, we begin to know wholeness. The Word did not only become flesh in Jesus' body, but it becomes flesh in the Body of Christ—in the gathered community of believers. My family is still standing and still growing in faith because so many loved ones, so many friends, so many brothers and sisters in Christ were Christ for us. If Christmas is about anything, it is about moving faith from an idea to a reality—a reality that we can touch and that touches us—literally!

So on this Christmas Day, we are invited to experience again the God who loves us so much that this God sent us the only begotten Son—in the flesh, that we might know this God's love for us. And we are invited to experience again that this God loves us so much that we are given each other—that we might know this God's love for us. And in that, there is tremendous grace and truth.

--Dan Anderson-Little