



Gifts of Christmas

A 2020 Advent Devotional



JOY
LOVE
PEACE
BELIEVE
CHRISTMAS



ADVENT DEVOTIONAL for 2020

Written by members and friends of the United Methodist Churches of Park County, Montana.

INTRO

God had the audacity to show up on planet Earth as a baby boy, born in a small obscure town, to an unmarried peasant couple. God shows up every day in surprising and unexpected ways in our lives today. Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. This devotional was written to encourage you to discover God's gifts each day – gifts of peace, hope, joy, faith, and love. I thank all the writers for sharing your heart and faith with us.

I invite you in this unusual advent season, to take time each day to sit still and open your heart to God. Find a place to sit. Get cozy under a quilt, or fleece blanket. Grab some hot cocoa. Put on quiet music and enjoy a candle, or Christmas lights. Perhaps find a sand timer from a game in your house. It can be a great tool to quiet your mind and center your heart. Here is a suggested spiritual practice for using this devotional guide.

Open your spirit to the presence of the Holy Spirit. Turn the sand timer over (or set a gentle timer on your phone) and sit in quiet for a minute. Notice your breathing. Put your hand on your heart and feel the warmth.

Read the scripture for the day. And sit in quiet again for another minute.

Read the devotion. What does it stir in you? Sit in quiet again for a minute.

Take moment to pray or write in a journal to process what you are thinking and feeling.

End by thanking God for the blessings you have received.

It is my prayer that you will discover God in these moments of stillness and quiet. And that the gifts God offers you will carry you through these days.

Pastor Patti

November 29, 2020

Mark 10:13-16 NIV The Little Children and Jesus

¹³ People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴ When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. ¹⁵ Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." ¹⁶ And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.

When I was growing up, church meant getting dressed up in our Sunday best, being on our “company” behavior, and staying quiet. Woe to the child who drew attention to our family pew by making noise, not paying attention, or goofing around! I don’t remember church as being particularly awful, but it also wasn’t particularly enjoyable or impactful. I could sing all the verses to “Jesus Loves Me,” but I certainly did not think that Jesus loved me in the way that welcomed me to him. He surely didn’t want me to bother him. I was just a little kid you know?

Thankfully times have changed. We not only welcome the children with all their exuberant activity, we yearn for them and rejoice in their presence. We teach them that they are worthy. We are truly following Jesus’ mandate when we let the little children come to him.

This is a vitally important message; however, the second part of the scripture is just as crucial. We need to receive God’s love with the heart and mindset of a child. We need to loosen up and become more spontaneous in expressing our faith. We must let go of our pretenses and be ourselves before God and each other. We are worthy of His kingdom not because of our age or experience, status or wealth, power or influence. Our worth comes from God, and we are all God’s children.

-Written by Lisa Held

November 30, 2020

John 5:1-9 NIV The Healing at the Pool

5 Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. ² Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda^[a] and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. ³ Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. ⁵ One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. ⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to get well?” ⁷ “Sir,” the invalid replied, “I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me. ⁸ Then Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” ⁹ At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.

Although the Gospel of John is my favorite, I have to say that this story has never made much sense to me, and that’s true even after reading about it in the hopes of seeing new things to help me write this!

I don’t know about you, but my brain has not been at its best during this pandemic, especially when it comes to really simple, common sense things. I’ve had a hard time seeing what’s obvious, even though it seems like that should be the first and easiest thing to do.

This has been true with this passage as well. It took a commentator pointing out that this is one of the few times Jesus heals someone who didn't ask to be healed for me to see this simple but so important fact. Duh! Isn't that one of the basic beliefs of Methodism, that God's grace is freely given to all? Even to people who don't have the hope to ask for it or the graciousness to give thanks when they receive it?

Yes, that's both the man in this story and me as well. I think I've had a hard time seeing the meaning of this story because it is in many ways my own. May I work each day to open my eyes to see the hope that is always there for me, grab ahold of it, and be thankful for it!

-Written by Amy Thomas

December 1, 2020

Matthew 1:22-25 NIV The birth of Jesus foretold

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"^[a] (which means "God with us"). ²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Faith or Fate!

Our first Christmas in Montana is ... how and when we met the Briggs family. Bill and I were out for a drive in the foothills of the Crazy Mountains one wintry day. As we drove over a hill and down into a lovely valley there shining in the front window of a small ranch home, a Christmas tree. Simple, welcoming, memorable. As the days grew closer to Christmas, I decided to go to the small Methodist Church in town. I was welcomed by an entire congregation of friendly folk, Ernie and Ellen Briggs were to be fast friends. I found out that it was their home, their tree that shone it's welcome to strangers that day. This moment led me to a lifetime friendship and awareness of how small our world truly is.

Ellen and Ernie introduced us to the entire community, in meeting these folks we were enlightened and enfolded in a journey of over 34 years that to this day, is a treasure. We have connections on this earth that reach distances in unexpected ways.

Faith leads us to do, be, achieve things impossible unless we take that step. Moving away from our family, making that initial decision led to experiences, friendships, revelations. The journey has not been without bumps, storms, but through the faith I have found in being a part of our church community each person is precious. God had his hand on the wheel as we negotiated those roads.

Each Christmas season brings us through the wonder, the expectancy, the beauty and yes, the faith of celebrating the birth of a baby boy. One child. One savior. One faith we share.

God works in mysterious ways!

-Written by Sarah Leyde

December 2, 2020

Matthew 13:44 NLT The Parable of the Hidden Treasure

“The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure that a man discovered hidden in a field. In his excitement, he hid it again and sold everything he owned to get enough money to buy the field—and to get the treasure, too!”

The joy of finding a lost item.

The very day that I was assigned this topic, “The joy of finding a lost item,” I happened to have lost a glove while on the daily walk taken by me and my husband. Actually, I lost both gloves but didn’t realize it. Near the end of our walk, one glove appeared on the ground by the sidewalk and the grass. Then I realized the matching glove was missing! Now, this is a small item. But I was distressed because the gloves were new, and this was the first day it was cold enough to wear new gloves, at least until I warmed up enough to remove them. I was further distressed to realize how careless I had been to unknowingly lose not only one but both! I have been carefully taught to take care of things which are useful or valuable. So, my husband walked one direction and I walked the other direction, retracing our steps. My steps took me back almost the whole route, and no glove! When I rejoined my husband, he had a big grin on his face and waved the lost glove at me. I experienced considerable joy, not only because of the found glove, but also because of the joyful greeting I received from him.

Eventually I read my assigned scripture. Oh, no, I thought—a parable! I had expected something like the parable of the lost sheep, more easily understood as Jesus reclaims one lost from the fold. But my assigned scripture required me to dig deeper.

I’ve had more than my share of worldly treasures. My mother loved pretty things in her home, and I easily embraced and inherited her joy and love of collecting and displaying treasures. Over the last couple of years, anticipating a move across country, I “downsized,” packed up my treasures and disposed of most of them one way or another.

I value treasures. So on the surface as I contemplated this scripture, I understand the joy of finding a treasure and wanting to sell everything to acquire enough money to buy the whole field, treasure

and all. As I dug under the surface, searching for the treasure of Jesus' words in yet another scriptural mystery, here are my personal thoughts:

I believe the kingdom of heaven is a treasure, some of which we can experience on earth during those times when our hearts and minds are aligned with what we feel to be the way Jesus wants us to live. But I also believe the kingdom of heaven is a treasure to seek as we continue to learn and strive to be people who grow toward that goal. Life with Jesus in the kingdom of heaven will be the ultimate joy.

-Written by Sandi Agnew (Pastor Patti's mom 😊)

December 3, 2020

Matthew 5: 43-48 Love for Enemies

It was morning recess; a cold November in central Montana. I wore my grandma's old muskrat fur coat. Recess duty always brought me closer to nature, kids, hands hanging onto my coat. All was good. Then a scream, a scuffle and agitated voices erupted. "Fight!" Oh, no, I thought. My searching eyes followed the signs to a corner of the dark brown brick school building. Two junior high girls were in high gear yelling, flailing, scratching, and hitting one another. As a first year teacher I rolled into the middle of the fracas, pushing girls apart, then assisted by a big boy and finally the principal.

Matthew 5:43-44 "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemies 44 but I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you'"

It didn't matter who you were that day...the snowflakes drifted softly upon all our heads and eyelashes.

Matthew 5:45 "that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."

Talking sense into junior high girls is a challenge. "You must," I pleaded, "be respectful of one another!" Just how do we show love and compassion to others? I've found it is hardest to love the ones who are hardest to love.

Matthew 5:46-47 "If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? 47 And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?"

We must always strive, as children of God, to embrace not only those like us, but more especially those NOT like us. We must be respectful of all people and their thoughts and ideas. We must strive for perfection embracing grace and holiness.

Matthew 5:48 "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Recess is over, but the battle remains ... Jesus teaches us that all it takes is a little love.

God taught us to pray.

-Written by Carol Kron



December 4, 2020

Matthew 14:22-33 NIV Jesus Walks on the Water

²² Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. ²³ After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, ²⁴ and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it. ²⁵ Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. ²⁶ When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear. ²⁷ But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." ²⁸ "Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water." ²⁹ "Come," he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" ³¹ Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?" ³² And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. ³³ Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

I've been invited to reflect on how I see peace in the above scripture.

The times we are in do not readily conjure peaceful thoughts or reflection, so I begin by defining what peace means to me. I think of peace as a still and content state of mind, free of worry or anxiety, being accepting of one's circumstance, whatever that circumstance may be.

The lead-in to this scripture finds Jesus having just learned of the beheading of John the Baptist. He seeks solitude, but the crowd follows him. He compassionately cures their sick and feeds them with nothing more than five loaves and two fish. Only after he has cared for the crowd does he finally make his way to the mountain to pray, to seek peace. After his time of prayer, he finds his way back to the disciples by walking on the sea. Their fright quickly turns to awe, surely, they find peace in their worship and declaration that Jesus is truly the Son of God.

From this scripture I glean that no matter how ceaseless the troubles of the world, the difficulty of our work, the inevitable temporary lapse of faith, or the personal losses one endures we too are able to find peace when we seek prayerful solitude and quiet reflection.

Prayer focus: Peace of mind for front line workers.

Thought for the day: Peace can be ours, if we seek it.

-Written by Merry Nelson

December 5, 2020

Matthew 2:1-2 The Magi Visit the Messiah

2 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

To me this is the most wonderful story of Hope in the Bible. The wise men came to worship the new King. Where they came from, we don't know. We also don't know how many there were. They may have been Jews from Babylon. They may have been eastern Astrologers. The Magi may have been from a different land. How did they know to follow the star? They may have traveled thousands of miles, we don't know. Maybe they had a special message from God to follow the star. We don't know. They followed the star in the east to Bethlehem to worship Him. They all brought different gifts. Couldn't God who created Heaven and Earth create a special star for his son? Why do we expect God to come to us, when those who are wise still seek and worship Jesus today for who he is.

-Written by Bob Peterson

December 6, 2020

Mark 1:40-42 NIV Jesus heals a man

A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Jesus was indignant. He reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed.

"Every gift which is given, even though it be small, is in reality great, if it is given with affection." - Pindar

Growing up, there wasn't a lot of extra money. WE didn't realize that we were "hard up" – everyone else was in the same "boat." Mom AND Dad gave us not only home-made gifts, but also one or maybe two "special" gifts. We had a tradition of "STOCKING PRESENTS"! Everyone in the family was to be creative and give a present to everyone else in the family, be it bought, made, or even regifted.

One year, I got a small bottle of perfume that was sold at the dime store called ATOM BOMB! Now you know what perfume from a dime store smells like – STROONG!!! I know even the first year I could be smelled ten minutes before I got there! Each year after that it got even stronger and worse.

After the first year, it was passed back and forth among the three sisters. Years later we three were married. We happened to be back at Mom and Dad's and we found that bottle of perfume and the fun and the race was on! One of the brother-in-law's got hold of it and the chase was on around the block. Thank heavens it was dark and the neighbors really couldn't recognize who was making all the noise!

We got to the house next door to Mom and Dad's neighbors and it happened to be on a corner lot. The three sisters knew that the neighbor had put a small height fence across the yard so people wouldn't cross over the grass. All of us avoided the yard except the guy with the perfume. If you want to know what happened next, I would love to tell you!

Gifts can show love in many different ways. IT brings many wonderful memories of yesteryears. It really doesn't take a lot of money, time, or effort or any occasion to show how much we care about others.

"Change now. Love now. Live now. Don't wait for people to give you permission to Love and to Live. Because they won't." Kris Carr

"Your friendship was a miracle-wonder, love far exceeding anything I've known – or ever hope to know." -2 Samuel 1:26 The Message

-Written by Anita Brawner

December 7, 2020

Micah 6:8

He has told you, O mortal, what is good: and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Routines

I find routines really appealing. With routines I know what to expect each day because it could be a repeat of the day before. But I think we can challenge ourselves each day and its verses like Micah 6:8 that can provide guidance to us.

If I follow guidance from the verse every day, it would be pleasing to God and beneficial to the world around us. To me, doing justice means being active and helping those in need by fixing injustices. Acts of love and kindness can be seen or unseen and as simple as asking someone how they are doing or as obvious as giving a homeless person a gift card for something to eat. Walking humbly for me is knowing that God is ultimately in charge and that I am a steward for him on this earth.

Prayer: Lord help us to follow your guidance every day and to break routines that don't put you first and foremost in our lives. Amen

-Written by Tom Kersbergen

December 8, 2020

Luke 17:11-19 Jesus Heals Ten Men with Leprosy

¹¹ Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy^[a] met him. They stood at a distance ¹³ and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" ¹⁴ When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed. ¹⁵ One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. ¹⁶ He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? ¹⁸ Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?" ¹⁹ Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."

As a child I loved to sing. We had a small children's choir at the Congregational Church and I participated every year. I was the enthusiastically loud singer. I wanted everyone to share the feeling of the music with me. However, the choir director had other thoughts, and told me kindly that I needed to sing without so much energy.

I tried out the instrumental world and played clarinet and bass clarinet in band and orchestra in junior and senior high school. They were ok, but they didn't make me feel the same as singing.

It really wasn't until I became an adult and stumbled upon handbells at Grace UMC that I finally found a way to express my love for music. There is the thrill and challenge of taking 8-12 people, combining everyone's individual notes, and creating one amazing voice. This is when the magic happens.

For many years, ringing bells gave me joy and peace. My frustrations and worries of the day would just melt away and I would leave the building in much better spirits.

What gives you joy in your day? What helps you let go of your worries?

-Written by Stacy Jovick

December 9, 2020

John 14:25–27 Jesus Promises the Holy Spirit

²⁵ All this I have spoken while still with you. ²⁶ But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.

27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

As I sit down to write this devotion, I realize that it is the night before Election Day in our country. Certainly not a time of peace when we are facing a heated Presidential campaign, eight months of a pandemic which has claimed thousands of lives, violent hurricanes and fires which have left people stripped of all of their possessions, and uncertainty about what the future will bring. And yet, I have chosen to write about peace, but not just ordinary peace-- God's peace, the peace that passes all understanding.

I have been fortunate to have experienced this wonderful peace that God gives when I was experiencing a situation involving a serious medical situation with one of my children. Everything was out of my hands, and at one time even the doctors were mystified. Prayer was the path I chose, and as I turned my concerns over to God and asked for his help, I received His amazing peace that passes all understanding. It came over me like a wash of comfort and quiet. I was not afraid. God answered my prayers and all ended well.

In this scripture Jesus assures His disciples that the Holy Spirit will be with them. Jesus then blesses them with His peace and tells them not to be troubled or afraid. Jesus' peace is not of this world, but a spirit filled peace sent by God the Father. Truly one that passes all understanding.

-Written by Carol Beadle

December 10, 2020

Luke 7:44-50 Jesus Is Anointed

⁴⁴ Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶ You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. ⁴⁷ Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little." ⁴⁸ Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." ⁴⁹ The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" ⁵⁰ Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

In this scripture passage, Jesus uses the actions of a woman expressing her love for Jesus to teach a lesson on why His earthly ministry was focused on those considered sinners and marginalized by society.

Luke tells us this woman was a sinner. The implication is that her sins are many. Jesus was at the home of Simon, the Pharisee. This woman entered a private home during a private dinner and began to put oil on Jesus feet, wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. All acts of love.

When Simon is outraged, Jesus tells him a parable about two men who had their debts forgiven by a moneylender. One debt large, the other smaller. Jesus asked Simon which man would love the moneylender more. Simon answered correctly, the one who was forgiven the larger debt. The more we recognize how much Jesus has done for us, and how much we need him, the greater our love for him.

I see this play out in my own life. I am the mother of seven children. I am blessed to have a wonderful relationship with each of my children. My oldest son is in prison. This is not his first trip. He is a drug addict trying to overcome his addiction and make his life right with God. Of my seven children, he is the one who calls me almost every day, thanks me for supporting him and who apologizes over and over again. The one who most needs my love and care. He loves me in a way my other children never will because they have never needed my love as much as he does. Like Jesus, I pour out my love for my son and he, like the sinful woman, responds with love and gratitude. I am able to love him this way because I have experienced God's steadfast love for me.

Prayer: Gracious and merciful God, Let us each accept that we are sinners, in need of your love and mercy. May we love you in return with never ending joy, faith, sacrifice and gratitude. Fill the hearts of those who don't know your love and salvation with a deep yearning to receive you. Amen
-Written by Terri Vaughn

December 11, 2020

Mark 8: 22-25 Jesus Heals a Blind Man at Bethsaida

²² They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. ²³ He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, "Do you see anything?" ²⁴ He looked up and said, "I see people; they look like trees walking around." ²⁵ Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.

Today's reading shares the story of how a blind man's eye sight was restored by Jesus. What I found interesting in this scripture was his vision didn't completely come back the first time Jesus

laid his hands on him. It took a second time for the blind man to see everything clearly. Often times we wish healing could be instant, however, in many instances healing can come in many stages.

I recently had a dear friend diagnosed with terminal cancer. Upon hearing those words, she immediately shut down, closing the door on those who loved her most. Her hope for healing was lost. After some time passed, she put together a Plan B. This included her getting a second opinion back in her home state near her family. With this plan you could see her spirit being renewed. She recently started her path to healing and the doctors are seeing some progress. It's going to be a long and arduous journey, but she's now got some fight in her and lots of prayer warriors praying for healing and hope.

Prayer: Dear God, please be with those who need their health restored. We know you have a plan for each one of them. May they be comforted by your healing hands and their faith sustained. Amen.

-Written by Shelly Kersbergen

December 12, 2020

Luke 1:26-38 NIV The Birth of Jesus Foretold

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." ²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." ³⁴ "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" ³⁵ The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called^[a] the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail." ³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

"Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free;
from our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee.
Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art;

dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart.

Born thy people to deliver, born a child and yet a King,
born to reign in us forever, now thy gracious kingdom bring.
By thine own eternal spirit rule in all our hearts along;
by thine all sufficient merit, raise us to thy glorious throne.”

Charles Wesley lived in a time when many people were suffering. As Charles considered the plight of so many in the world and then thought of Jesus’ birth, a hopeful thought consumed him. He thought about what a birth meant in the eyes of those looking forward to it. He penned, “Come, thou long expected Jesus.” In this hymn he married the concept of the power and the love of Jesus. Both would be needed to save the world. We need both today. Come, thou long expected Jesus!

-taken from *Songs of Christmas* by Ace Collins

December 13, 2020

Mark 1:35 Jesus Prays in a Solitary Place

³⁵ *Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.*

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want,
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
He leads me beside the still waters,
He restores my soul.

No one knows what journeys we might be on or experiencing and where God is leading us.

I have been on a journey for 3 months. After having loved ones praying for me and myself praying for healing, I have found that Jesus has been carrying me through all of this. As I now take baby steps in my recovery, I look back and experience this time as God teaching me to rest, have peace and patience, and know that He is with me. I have experienced such joys of the medical field people, my dear friends, and family, and most of all God surrounding me with His love.

During this Advent season, my prayer for all of us is to look for and be surrounded with peace, love, hope, and joy in our hearts! We can look forward every day to our many blessings and to be thankful for these abundant blessings!

May the Good Lord Bless and Keep You!!

-Written by Gayle Kamps

December 14, 2020

Luke 10:25-28 How Do you Read the Law?

²⁵ On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶ "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?" ²⁷ He answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" ²⁸ "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

What does Love Thy Neighbor look like? In today's world, it may feel harder than ever to live that out. Your neighbor may display very different values than yours, perhaps they say things, or behave in ways, that you find abhorrent, even. Furthermore, "thy neighbor" may include people who live 1,000 miles away.

But perhaps it doesn't mean we have to actually feel towards someone the same way we feel toward our dearest beloveds. Perhaps it simply means to try to find the humanity in every person, to try to see the child who God loves inside every person, to lean towards acceptance, and to not say or do something that would harm that person. As Martin Luther King said, "Hate begets hate...we must meet the forces of hate with the power of love."

Prayer: Dear God, please help me to live your words, your desires for me; help me actually put love out in front of me when I want to instead judge, criticize, demean, or harm someone. Help me practice loving action every day, with every step, and every breath. Amen.

-Written by Chris Hillegass

December 15, 2020

Mark 10:46-52 Blind Bartimaeus Receives His Sight

⁴⁶ Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (which means "son of Timaeus"), was sitting by the roadside begging. ⁴⁷ When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" ⁴⁸ Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" ⁴⁹ Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." So they called to the blind man, "Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you." ⁵⁰ Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus. ⁵¹ "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked him. The blind man

said, "Rabbi, I want to see." ⁵² "Go," said Jesus, "your faith has healed you." Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.

Blind Bartimaeus, was a beggar, (probably the only means of livelihood the culture allowed him.) Are we ever in that position? He'd probably been there most of his life. Are we, too, blind? Had his blind eyes, somehow glimpsed the Christmas Star? Have we seen that star? Somehow, that starlight touched a corner deep in his heart and made him long for healing. We, too, long for healing in the dark places that scratch our hearts. Then Jesus came near; Bartimaeus cried out, "Have mercy." Jesus spoke his name, and he threw down a coat, his only possession; and ran toward Jesus crying, "I want to see... Jesus." When life, with its challenges comes, do we throw away all we possess, for the greater reward of seeing... Jesus? His simple act of faith and trust in Jesus healed Bartimaeus. With BLIND faith, what possibilities do we have to see and be healed?

Faith is a wholehearted trust in the promises of God. Faith trusts in good, even unseen. Faith prays with assurance of God's answers. Faith acknowledges God's strength to meet any challenge. Faith inspires confidence, knowing nothing is impossible with God. Faith sees the dark corners of life through the light of God.

With faith and a servant's heart, we're assured that God will make our lives productive in service, prosperous with joy and abundant with love. Is there any greater Christmas joy than the gift of Love? Faith reminds us that gift is always found in the manger of our hearts. We don't have to have great faith; We need Faith in a Great God!

-Written by Marje Erickson (friend of Pastor Patti who joins on Thursday evening Hymns and Prayers service)

December 16, 2020

Matthew 28:16-20 The Great Commission

¹⁶ Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Most of my prayers these days and this year have been about peace. In these difficult times that our country and world is in Peace is not easy.

It is hard to be peaceful with so much uncertainty. If we can find peace within ourselves and spread it to others maybe we can have peace on earth and goodwill toward men.

-Written by Susan Payne

December 17, 2020

Luke 15:1-7 The Parable of the Lost Sheep

15 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." ³ Then Jesus told them this parable: ⁴ "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? ⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' ⁷ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

ARLINGTON SUNDAY MORNING JOY

On a first trip to Arlington, Virginia, we were staying in a main district Hotel amidst other arrivals for a Sunday afternoon wedding. Early Sunday morning I decided was a good time to do a walking tour with an interesting destination several miles away that I had never seen—the US Patent Office. Around midway Stacy needed to find a rest room and one of the few places active was a Baptist Church down the block. As we approached the side entry outburst an energetic, smile from ear to ear, early rehearsal lady choir member. Her simple, joyous, passing greeting so warmly flowed over us that it was calming, uplifting, and inspiring all within the passing seconds. Wow—was she full of the Spirit and so it filled us! After seeing a very closed down, modern set of Patent Office Buildings and after a neat elevator ride overlooking the City from the George Washington Memorial building, we headed back. Always with a nose for a museum or antique store, about 4 blocks from the Hotel I told Stacy I was diverting two blocks to the West to see if a small museum had opened while she returned to the Hotel. As I walked there was now much more activity. It was nearing 11 o'clock and I was just thinking that I had lost my opportunity to catch a local church service --- but church bells began pealing from a church $\frac{3}{4}$ of a block away and across the street from the small museum. Suddenly, a burst of people came from a big open entry way to my right—very odd as there had just been normal building shops that I was walking by. Signage in the big entry way said that services had just concluded in one part of the building and that 11 o'clock services were commencing upstairs in the main United Methodist church. So I had found the entry of the Church as church bells from down the street kept ringing. I climbed the stairs and there

opened a large ornate sanctuary with dark, circular pews and the service just beginning! Special music were trumpeters who trumpeted to fill the large expanse with chilling precision. Called forward were the children with their back to school backpacks and a blessing was given on the backpacks and the backpackers. With the joy and smiles from the first encounter of the day still swirling and now with the magic of a whole Methodist church appearing from nowhere with a fine trumpeting service, my spirit was joyous and full. Patent that.....what else would the day bring?

-Written by Bob Jovick

December 18, 2020

Mark 4:30-32 The Message

"How can we picture God's kingdom? What kind of story can we use? It's like a pine nut. When it lands on the ground it is quite small as seeds go, yet once it is planted it grows into a huge pine tree with thick branches. Eagles nest in it."

This version of the story makes a lot of sense to me, especially since I can look out the window at pine trees that help me to see how spectacularly faith can grow. But I had an experience this summer that led me to have a new appreciation for the mustard seed found in other translations of this story.

Early one morning at the dog park I was cutting down weeds along trails, and a man walking by asked me if I knew that I was cutting down mustard plants? I said "No," and thought to myself "I don't really care what this is. I'm on a search and destroy mission for any plant that's encroaching on the trail. And who are you anyway? I've never seen you here before."

He replied to my "No" by saying "Don't you know that a weed is just a flower in the wrong place?" Since I didn't know if mustard is classified as a noxious weed in Montana, I decided the best way to respond to this cliché was to smile politely and walk the other way.

Later that summer when everything green at the park had turned brown, I noticed some small birds on that patch of mustard plants eating their seeds. I thought about that stranger and the interconnections he could see: from plants, to seeds, to birds, on and on, through all living things.

I like how the different translations of this story help each of us to find an image that mirrors how we see faith, from big pine trees and majestic eagles to mustard plants and sparrows. For myself, I find power in a faith that grows through the interconnections of the many "littles" who depend upon each other for life. I'm thankful that Jesus taught through parables which open up many windows to help each of us see the meaning we need.

-Written by Amy Thomas

December 19, 2020

Mark 1:9-11 The Baptism of Jesus

⁹ At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

LOVE

"Love is real, Real is love
Love is feeling, feeling love
Love is wanting, to be loved

Love is touch, touch is love
Love is reaching, reaching love
Love is asking, to be loved.

Love is you, you and me.
Love is knowing, we can be.

Love is free, free is love.
Love is living, living love.
Love is needing to be loved.

-By John Lennon 1970

This song was written by John Lennon, and it was recorded for his first solo album after the breakup of The Beatles in 1970. The members of The Beatles sang about love, heartache, jealousy, and even yellow submarines. But they mainly sang about love. Not hate or violence, but beautiful, simple love.

The song "Love" is simple and from the heart, with a bit of yin and yang in its construction. God is love. Love is God. It's that simple.

-Written by Jim Baskett

December 20, 2020

O Little Town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie; above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by. Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

For Christ is born of Mary, and gathered all above, while mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of wondering love. O morning stars together, proclaim the holy birth, and praises sing to God the King, and peace to all on earth!

How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given; so God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven. No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.

O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray; cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell; O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel!

This is one of my favorite carols. I love its simplicity, its hope, its faith. Every year, as I move through the chaos of the Christmas season, the third verse speaks to my heart. "God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven. Where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in." It is written by Phillips Brooks. He was a great preacher who got discouraged and tired from the demands of his ministry. He took a sabbatical to the Holy Land. And there one day, got on a horse and rode to Bethlehem. It was a powerfully renewing experience for him. Years later he put the meaning of the experience to words in the form of this carol. It is the simple language of a common traveler in search of spiritual renewal that continues to touch lives today. As we travel through this unusual Christmas season, in search of spiritual renewal, may we know the blessings of heaven. May we have faith that the dear Christ will enter in to our tired lives and discouraged hearts.

-written by Pastor Patti Agnew

December 21, 2020

Read John 14:1-27

Peace is what I leave with you; it is my own peace that I give you. I do not give it as the world does. Do not be worried and upset; do not be afraid. John 14:27

It was October 30th of 2014 and I was visiting Mother in the assisted living home where she had resided for the last few years. Her dementia had fully progressed as she was unaware of people and surroundings and confined to bed. Knowing her life was nearing the end, we had already encouraged her to go be with Dad, her soulmate. The fact that hearing is one of the last bodily functions to go led me to share scripture with her. This day, I opened her Bible and found a printed card entitled "Help From The Bible". I talked through the listings with her and suggested we read the listing "In Need Of Peace" as she did seem to be agitated. We were to read John 14. Verse 1 of course says: "Do not be worried and upset," Jesus told them. "Believe in God and believe also in me. There are many rooms in my Father's house, and I am going to prepare a place for you. I would not tell you this if it were not so. And after I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to myself, so that you will be where I am." (verses 1-3). WOW, did we need to hear that! I feel certain this reminder from scripture comforted Mother. I know it reassured me. Then especially calming was to go on to read the above verse John 14:27, "Peace is what I leave with you..."

Imagine my awe when I arrived at Mother's bedside December 12, just an hour after her passing, to read John 14:27 again, though this time in the picture box of scriptures on her night stand. I had not previously placed it there.... God's peace revealed again!

So, when our family gathered for Christmas Eve twelve days later, the first without her, it was crystal clear the scripture we were supposed to share. (I even bought plates and napkins that had PEACE written on them to help us cope.) God's watch-care over us in providing this scripture surely made the season more bearable for us all. It was a peaceful Christmas knowing our mother/grandmother was at peace as well with Jesus and her beloved Jack.

Prayer: Dear loving Father, thank you for sending us your peace filled Son to guide and comfort us. In His name we pray, Amen.

Digging Deeper into scripture: Phil. 4:7, 1 Thess. 5:13

-Written by DeeAnn Durgan

December 22, 2020

JOY!

What a blessing -- It makes life worth living, doesn't it. We find **JOY** everywhere, if we just take the time to look -- in our families, our labor, our recreation, our friendships, celebrations,

achievements, even in our difficulties. And especially in new life -- like the **joy** of the Magi the night that Christ was born.

Matthew 2:10-12 tells us:

*When they saw the star they rejoiced with exceeding great **joy**. And when they were to come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary, his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh ---*

That's why we bestow gifts today -- so we can share **JOY**. We bestow gifts every day, without realizing we are doing so.

Some of us cook, bake, create culinary delights;

Or build things -- bridges, houses, ramps, barns,

We draw, sketch, paint, sculpt and carve;

We research, study, think, and calculate

and we daydream, imagine, dream, and scheme --

All these daily "things" we take for granted are truly ways of spreading joy, if not to others, than to ourselves, as we nourish our spirits and souls..

For instance, in my case, I like words. I work crosswords, play scrabble, write stories, diagram sentences, compose poems, fashion limericks; and I read -- books, signs, proverbs, poetry, cereal boxes, tributes, warnings -- anything with words. Can't help it. I'm a "wordy."

So, back to Matthew 2:10. To satisfy my own passion, I decided to put it in my own words:

The Magi:

When they saw the star, they rejoiced with delight

There was no doubt that something special was happening that night

The angels were singing -- it was time for real **JOY**

Mary had delivered a remarkable boy.

So they knelt down and worshiped him; they knew right away

He was no ordinary baby asleep in the hay

He was special, and destined to bring peace, **joy**, and love

The son of God, from the Father, above

He came as a child, so life could begin

For shepherds, and angels, and women, and men

So they presented their gifts to welcome that boy

The Savior was born, the creator of **JOY**.

December 23, 2020

Luke 2:8-14 NIV Glory to God

⁸And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

*¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."*

Joyful Messages

I've had two cheerleaders through most of my life...my Mother and my husband, Dick. Sadly, for me, they both passed away within a few short years of each other. I remember thinking, "Where will I get those messages of encouragement when I really need them?! In a mode of reciprocity, I also wanted to know that they were each "okay". In time, across the dimensions, I received reassurances in interesting ways.

In Dick's case, a few weeks after his passing the dog and I were awakened one night by the back door light, which shined into the bedroom window, suddenly going off! I thought it may have burned out. I went to the back door and, low and behold, it went on easily. It had never done that before and never did afterward! As I thought about it, it dawned on me...that playful RDC, he's saying, "Hey Jane...I'm A-OK, just flip on the light and I'm here!"

As to my Mother, I was at a spiritual retreat at Deep Bay on Flathead Lake a few months after she had passed. At the close of a session one evening we each drew two angel cards to write about before bedtime. I first drew Joy, and then Clarity.....each wonderful writing prompts. I chose to write in my journal the next morning, only as I wrote them down, I wrote Clarity first, and then Joy. Well, it dawned on me in a flash of JOY. Clarity and Joy are just too close to my Mother's name...CLARA JO!

On a deep level our faith has taught us that we are never alone. Though WOW, what a wave of warm reassurance when we receive JOYFUL MESSAGES from loved ones!

December 24, 2020

Luke 2:1-7 The Birth of Jesus

2 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while^[a] Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to their own town to register. ⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

Love Stories

“You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody.” -2
Corinthians 3:2 (NIV)

Every Christmas morning my boys read a letter left to them from “Santa”. This is one of my favorite moments of the season, and a time often full of tears as we sit together on Christmas morning. The letters are lovingly crafted, recalling special events, memories, and moments from the past year, ultimately reminding each boy that they are treasured and uniquely loved. The hope is that they will grow into loving young men, knowing they are held dear and have a fine reputation to live up to. May they can refer to these letters their whole life through.

In this passage from Luke, we are reminded of our own fine reputation to live up to. That God sent his son, to be born to Mary and Joseph in troubled times. That men traveled from afar to hold in wonder the miracle that was gifted to this world. That this child would grow to inspire multitudes for thousands of years to come. This was the ultimate gift of love, one much anticipated and greatly treasured. This story, lovingly left to us each and every Christmas, is one we can carry with us throughout our lives, bearing it as a compass to point us in the direction of our faith.

May we author our own “letters” of love to the world around us during this precious season of Advent and Christmas, living up to the fine reputation set before us by our living God.

Thought for the day:

*“I'm a little pencil in the hand of a writing God,
who is sending a love letter to the world.”*

-Mother Teresa

Prayer: Dear Lord. Make me a channel of your peace and love, not only during this season of quiet and anticipation, but the whole year through. Guide me to be the person you made me to be. Amen.

-Written by Kristin Long

December 25, 2020

John 1:1-5, 14

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. 3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. 4 In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

These words from the gospel of John are beautiful and poetic. They express the mystery of Jesus. I also find them hard to comprehend. These few verses are the author of John's gospels way to introduce us to Jesus. No angel visits, no mangers, no shepherds or wise men. Jesus is the love of God come to life in a human being. In Jesus we see grace-filled love, not judgmental love. In Jesus we see love that goes to any length to reach people. In Jesus we see love that makes hurting people whole. In Jesus we see love that opens human life up to eternal possibilities.

In this most unusual of seasons, life has been disrupted. Many of our cherished Christmas traditions have been denied this year. So much is different and yet one thing remains the same. Jesus will be born again. My hope is that we will see new insights into this story from our disrupted Christmas perspective.

No matter how dark the world feels right now, light has come. And that light has the power to bring new life out of any darkness. It may take a while. There is purpose in darkness. Yet out of darkness comes new life. From the darkness underground seeds sprout. From the darkness of a chrysalis a butterfly emerges. From the darkness of a womb a new baby is born. Hold on to hope.

-Written by Pastor Patti Agnew
