The Unexpected Christmas

Devotional Book 2024
Bethesda United Methodist Church

Dear Beloved Congregation,

We joyously invite you to journey with us through the sacred season of Advent with our specially curated devotional series. As we prepare our hearts for Christmas, let us reflect thoughtfully on the unexpected blessings and divine mysteries that have graced our past Christmases.

In this series, you'll find enriching content every day of the week. On Sundays, we illuminate your path with a candle-lighting liturgy. From Monday through Friday, we share reflections that inspire introspection, commencing with a detailed introduction on Dec. 2. Every Saturday, we present a verse and blessing inspired by our Advent series, 'The INN'.

We also warmly invite you to partake in our Sunday morning worship, evensong, and special events throughout this Advent season. Remember, the spirit of Christmas often arrives in the most unexpected of ways, so let's keep our hearts open and ready.

We thank Dr. Shaw Brewer for overseeing this project and Rev. Steven Martin, Director of Communications, for presenting this year's Advent Devotion in such a beautiful format. We are truly blessed to have a dedicated and collaborative team here at BUMC.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact Dr. Shaw Brewer at shaw@washmorefeet.org.

For any queries, contact us at shaw@washmorefeet.org.

Thank you,

Adult Education Committee, Rev. HiRho, and Dr. Shaw

“Making Room”
First Week of Advent

December 1 -Lighting of the first Advent candle

Read this out loud, and together if you are with others…

Hope waits for us at Advent
Hope waits for us to trust.
Hope waits for our commitment
to a land that’s kind and just.

In this time of preparation
for the work of co-creation,
for the birthing of a world
that heals the ones in pain.
Hope is born in us again!

Light a candle.

Today I offer the Light of Hope to illumine the Door of Welcome.
May this light shine in my heart, in my life, and in our community.
May Hope awaken me to possibilities and lead to greater hospitality.

December 2

This first devotional is an introduction to this book. I love our Advent theme for the Christmas devotional this year because it reminds me how unexpected the miracle was. And, it wasn't just a surprise to Mary, who was unexpectedly pregnant by miraculous means. It ended with Joseph, who was surprised that his wife was pregnant before they had even been together. But the shepherds were shocked; the wise men were in awe by the wonder of the babe they found in the manger, and Herod was even surprised at the unexpected king who was born.

Can we remember the hope and joy in our unexpected Christmas memories? And can we feel peace and love through the devotionals in this book? Later in this devotional booklet I will share a story of one of my most unexpected Christmases. And, many others will share thelrs to. And, as you remember your expected Christmas stories, too, I hope you stop and think about the miracles of those unexpected Christmases and how miraculous the first Christmas was.

And may it change us as we consider this. How can this Christmas miracle we celebrate change the world? We do the work we do our best to make sure that every child has a Christmas present, whether they expect it or not, through our angel tree. May we be ready for the unexpected as we welcome those for Sunday worship services, participate in the live nativity, and marvel at the beautiful music for the Christmas concert. And, may we open our hearts enough to realize how unexpected the Jesus we worship was when he came and how he can still offer us unexpected Christmas miracles.

December 3

Sharing the Spirit of Christmas with Immigrants from the Congo.

As I reflect back on some of my past Christmases, one event stands out with feelings of coziness, happiness and a warm, bright glow. When BUMC joined with Beth El Congregation (the synagogue across the street from our church) and St. Mark Presbyterian Church (along Old Georgetown Road) to help welcome and support an immigrant family from the Congo, we decided to have a Christmas event with the Family at their home. Working with this lovely Muslim family was an incredible challenge partly because of the language differences (They spoke Swahili.) but also because there were so many cultural differences and brand-new situations for them. When we helped the family (two parents and 7 children) settle into a 5-bedroom apartment in Aspen Hill they didn't know the difference between a refrigerator and a freezer and they definitely didn't know how to use a washer or dryer.

As we entered Advent, we started to

plan a Christmas event with the family. I was anxious about how we could share Christmas with this Muslim family and in addition, be thoughtful toward our Jewish friends from Beth El. I didn't want of offend anyone or look like we were trying to push our religion onto anyone. A member of St. Mark Presbyterian Church donated a large artificial tree and old ornaments for their home. Believe it or not, a Jewish family from Beth El assembled the tree. There was a humorous moment when a tall Jewish teenager from Beth El said, "I never imagined that I would be the one to put the star on the top of the Christmas tree!" The family totally enjoyed putting Christmas ornaments onto their tree. Nancy and Bruce Smith came to the rescue and with their generosity prepared large, overflowing Christmas stockings for each family member full of candy, small books, toys, card games, art supplies and yo-yos. It was fun to watch everyone curiously examine each item in their stocking.

We had set up a small Nativity set. The family was particularly interested in the animals in the crèche scene because they had seen similar animals in Africa. They found it very amusing to hear us attempt to repeat after them the Swahili animal names. Nancy had helped to include the family on our BUMC Angel Tree Gift list so that each family member received an age-appropriate gift. The evening of the event was chilly and dark but their living room had a warm glow and was cozy as we all sat on the couches and chairs. I had brought my ukulele and did my best to sing and play the music for some of our favorite Christmas carols. They had never heard any of the Christmas Carols, not even Silent Night or Jingle Bells, but they were polite and enjoyed listening to the ukulele. The father indicated with hand motions that he knew how to play something like a guitar from when he was in the Congo. The room had the same fun-filled feeling as any Christmas morning, opening gifts! As we said goodbye we hugged and they smiled with great appreciation. When the party was over and we drove home, I realized that we really had shared the authentic Spirit of Christmas with this Congolese family, in spite of our language, cultural and religious differences. What an honor it was to be able to offer them gifts and share our Christmas love with immigrants from a different part of the world.

December 4

An unexpected Christmas experience that I remember well happened the year I had just turned ten years old. Even though it was a pretty big deal to finally mark my age in double digits, I was feeling very serious about life in general just then.

I grew up in Dayton, Virginia, a small town and farming community in the Shenandoah Valley. Our family attended Dayton Methodist Church, and it was a highlight of the week to see our church and Sunday School friends every Sunday. Our Sunday School class was small, but we were an extremely tight-knit group, and had been together since babyhood.

There were always Christmas celebrations at church that I remember fondly. Usually there was a program that all of the Sunday School children participated in. I can recall memorizing Bible verses and other speaking parts for the programs. There was always a lot of singing involved, which was my favorite part.

One year there was someone dressed as Santa Claus. I was terrified of Santa! Even though Santa was handing out treats and I really wanted mine, I was so scared that my older brother Tommy had to go get mine for me. We received a small, decorated cardboard box that held a candy cane, an orange, and few other small goodies. I treasured my box and loved that it had a white string handle so I could carry it easily. I think I carried mine around until it finally fell apart.

The unexpected event of that Christmas when I was ten years old was precipitated by a sad event from some months earlier. It impacted our small community and church family greatly. Our Sunday School classmate, Kenny, died in a tragic accident on his family's farm. It was the first time in my life I had experienced losing a close friend, especially someone my own age. It was quite a blow to everyone. As Christmas approached that year, there was definitely a more somber tone than usual in the preparations for the holidays.

That year, our Sunday School teacher, Miss Wintie Heatwole hosted a very special Christmas party for our class in her home. Miss Wintie lived on the same street the church was located on, in a large, old-fashioned two-story brick house. She lived on the first floor, and someone else lived on the second floor.

Miss Wintie was an elementary school teacher for many years. I realize now how incredible it was that she taught school every weekday and also taught Sunday School every Sunday. She never married or had children of her own, so I think she truly loved teaching. She was a so-called "born teacher."

Miss Wintie's home was simple as I recall, but cozy and comfortable. The Christmas party was held in her large dining room, where there were many beautiful cups and saucers of various patterns on display on a sideboard. Miss Wintie had been a collector of cups and saucers her entire life, and her collection was really something to see.

When we arrived for the party Miss Wintie welcomed us warmly and then announced that we were to each select one of her cup-and-saucer sets to use that evening, which was very special and seemed like such a grown-up thing to be invited to do. She said we would go in alphabetical order, according to the first letter of our first name to choose. I was somewhat disappointed about that since my name starts with the letter V. Even though I tried not to show it, Miss Wintie noticed my disappointment, and very quietly and kindly told me I could use the first letter of my middle name instead, Ann! I can still recall how happy that small, very kind decision made me. My favorite color was pink, and I am sure I picked the prettiest pink cup and saucer of the bunch. I think Miss Wintie truly understood and cared deeply for the children she taught.

We played some games that evening, musical chairs, and charades, and others I can't quite remember now, and had some refreshments of course. We drank punch from our special china cups and had dainty little tea sandwiches and other finger foods suitable for a party. The best part came at the end when Miss Wintie served round ice cream slices on fancy plates. Each ice cream slice had a Christmas design in the center; Santa, a bell, a wreath or tree: pretty, and delicious! I had had Neapolitan ice cream slices before (vanilla, chocolate, strawberry) but never anything like this.

I think we all felt very grown up and somewhat sophisticated to be at a fancy evening event without our parents or siblings. The best part was that it was an event planned especially for just our Sunday school class.

I am sure Miss Wintie didn't have a large salary or lot of disposable income, but I will never forget her, or her generosity in having such a wonderful party for her Sunday School class. She felt Kenny's loss as deeply as the rest of us and made the wise decision to do something to try to help us all feel better. It worked. She was truly a kind, loving, and unselfish person with a huge heart. More than that, though, she understood the true meaning of Christmas.

By celebrating the Christmas season with us in such a special and meaningful way Miss Wintie rekindled in all of us a renewed spirit of peace, hope, love, and joy. I am grateful to have been raised in a family and community where my faith was molded in such a positive way and modeled by so many good people. I am grateful, too that my faith continues to be strengthened by the good people of Bethesda United Methodist Church.

-Virginia Dansie

December 5

"The waiting is the hardest part
Every day you see one more card
You take it on faith, you take it to the heart
The waiting is the hardest part."
– Tom Petty, "The Waiting"

Tom Petty's chorus resonates deeply during Advent. Waiting challenges us, stirs our impatience, and tests our faith. Yet, Advent is a season defined by waiting—waiting for the celebration of Christ's birth and the fulfillment of His redemptive mission through His death and resurrection.

For centuries, God's people waited for the promised Messiah, yearning for freedom, justice, and peace. When Jesus was born, it marked the beginning of a greater story. Though God had come to dwell with us, His ultimate victory over sin and death was still to come.

Even Mary, who carried the Savior, had to wait. She pondered mysteries far beyond her understanding, knowing her son's life would include great suffering. Jesus Himself spent His ministry waiting for the appointed time to fulfill His purpose. In the garden of Gethsemane, He prayed in anguish, knowing the cross awaited. And after His crucifixion, His followers waited in despair for three days, uncertain of the resurrection that would change everything.

This waiting isn't passive—it's transformative. In waiting, God works in us, teaching us trust, deepening our faith, and preparing our hearts. Advent reminds us that the birth of Jesus points us toward the hope of His sacrifice and resurrection. Through His death, we find forgiveness, and through His resurrection, we are promised eternal life.

The waiting may be hard, but it is filled with purpose. As we journey through Advent, may we reflect on the hope born in Bethlehem, fulfilled on the cross, and proven at the empty tomb.

December 6

I will never forget my first Christmas as a Franciscan Monk. I became a Franciscan monk in 1987 and spent my first year in Juliet, Illinois. It was the first Christmas I did not get to celebrate with my family. That Christmas, I got to cook my first Christmas turkey with all of the trimmings for the Franciscans. The church I worked at did a live nativity outside the church; it was extraordinary because of its connection to St. Francis, and it was my first year as a monk.

The thing I remember most about that Christmas is the live nativity. I will always remember my first live nativity. My first experience was when I was a Franciscan. St. Francis, who is very special to me, is the one who began the live nativity. He began it because he wanted a way to teach the common man in the Middle Ages about Christmas. He was inspired to do that after his pilgrimage to the holy land. However, he could not write to teach them about it because many

people at that time were illiterate and therefore could not read or write, so he did a manger scene so that they could understand the story and learn it fully. He also thought it was a sign of what Christ stood for and would celebrate the poor, humble roots of Jesus, which he saw as being in great contrast to how many Italians lived at this time.

He did this with great solemnity and made this dream come true only three years before his death. Songs of praise met his actions, and people still find power in this tradition to this day.

Even though today we can read Christmas stories in many translations, Live nativities are still a powerful reminder of the solemnity of God and a reminder that Jesus was born into abject poverty. I am happy to do it, and I am happy our church does it because it makes me feel connected to my Franciscan roots and lets me help our youth and children learn the true meaning of the Christmas story. Please come to our live nativity on December 8!

December 7

A verse and blessing to end the week of hope:

Psalm 25: 4-5

Make your ways known to me, Lord;
teach me your paths.
Lead me in your truth—teach it to me—
because you are the God who saves me.
I put my hope in you all day long.

A Blessing

May God's Door of Welcome
swing open just a little bit more.

May Jesus' humble first dwelling
remind you of the plenty you already know.

And may the Spirit lead you into
more possibility and hospitality that you can imagine,

making room in The Inn for all.

May it be so.

“A Place at the Table”

Second Week of Advent

December 8

Read this out loud, and together if you are with others…

Peace waits for us at Advent
Peace waits for us to rest.
Peace waits for our acceptance
of the truth that we are blessed.

In this time of preparation
for the work of co-creation,
for the birthing of a world
of gentleness and play.
Peace is born in us each day!

Light two candles.

Today I offer the Light of Hope and Peace to illumine the Door of Welcome.
May this light shine in my heart, in my life, and in this community.
May Peace awaken us to possibilities and lead us to greater hospitality.
There IS room in this Inn, a House for the Holy.

December 9

The one part of working at a church I was not excited about was missing Christmas with my family. Since I was little, Christmas has been an essential part of my family experience as a child. I remember that we saw both sets of grandparents and cousins every Christmas. Then, as I got older, I spent Christmas with my dad and the rest of our family, including what my dad refers to as "all of the inlaws and outlaws."

Our celebrations constantly alternated between the 23rd and 26th to ensure everyone could do their other celebrations. The first year was the 26th, so I made it home in plenty of time for the Christmas dinner or brisket, and we all opened our presents together like normal.

Last year, it was supposed to be on the 23rd the following year, and I was sure that everyone would celebrate without me, especially since it was the kids who would miss if they didn't. But instead, they celebrated with me again. They ensured I could open gifts with them, partake in the brisket, and not miss Christmas. This was unexpected, making me feel like a precious family member. This year, I am thankful that we will also be able to celebrate with each other, and I will always be happy to have a family who makes room for me at their table, even when the table has to be set up at a different time.

And, whether you are alone this Christmas or juggling multiple tables, I want you to know there is a place for you. There is a place for you at BUMC and a place for you at God's table. Just know that, and even if this is unexpected, it shouldn't because, after all the one who invites us all to the table knows what it feels like to show up in the world without a place that was suitable for his birth.

December 10

"Merry Covid-ristmas!"

or

"Tonight at the Organ, Ebenezer Scrooge!"

It was dark, it was cold, Christmas trees were up, decorations were out, lights were lit, and other than the fact that it was pouring down rain, it was like any other Christmas Eve. But this was anything but normal. On December 24, 2020, we had been separated from each other for almost 10 months with many hopes of a return to normalcy dashed along the way. We had managed to create a decent online atmosphere for worship, but this was Christmas! It just felt wrong!

I first played for Christmas Eve services in 1985. Choirs, brass, bells, and a standing-room-only crowd were the norm! But this…this was going to be bad. I truly felt like Scrooge! "Humbug!" I muttered as I slid onto the bench and turned the organ on.

I thought of how I always pause during the 11:00 p.m. service to "take in the moment." It's so peaceful there in

the darkened Sanctuary with just a few faithful souls present. It's a stark contrast between the joy and the peace of Christmas. "Not tonight!" I distinctly heard that phrase deep from the recesses of my mind, and for better or for worse, I believed it.

But somehow, my "make the best of it" abilities kicked in. Maybe it was the visual of the lanterns (paper bags with lights inside) floating from our parking lot to Huntington Parkway during a downpour that made me laugh. Maybe it was the sanctuary that was fully decked out despite no one being present. The organ played – albeit softer than usual. The carols were sung, but the only voice I heard was Max's. And that moment of peace? It came, or more to the point, I recognized it.

If I never experience another Christmas like that one, it'll be too soon, but the fact that it came in spite of us…in spite of me…that will be a gift I'll always treasure.

-Chris Warrington

December 11

Christmas in Iraq, 2006

Following my first tour In Iraq, I retired from the Justice Department only to be hired by the State Department in 2006 to return to Iraq as a Legal Advisor to the Ambassador. My colleague was Meera de Mel from State. We have become fast lifelong friends. Our office was located in Sadaam's former, tacky and ornate palace converted into a large and complex embassy. We led a crisis driven life responding to events as they occurred. On this holiday, the Palace was decorated with lots of displays on the doors and Christmas trees throughout. The dining hall was festive including bagpipes, small bands, a few choruses. Folks wore red elf hats. There were "blow ups" (poor choice of words in Iraq) of camo snowmen and Santa.

Christmas Eve day commenced with two nasty diplomatic/legal issues morphing every couple of hours with a new twist requiring new brainstorming, another round of calls with Washington, another staff huddle followed by another meeting with the Ambassador: all courtesy of our implacable Iranian friends and their militias. It was relentless. I finally broke away, brain fried around midnight.

During the day, the Christmas spirit did seem to dwell with the embassy folk as though the merry Dickens Ghost strode the halls. Hearts were more open and affable calling out "Merry Christmas" or, in British fashion, "Happy Christmas"! The only sullen moment: a Marine sentry refusing to admit an unbadged Santa (who was actually a well know British Colonel). Semper fi!

There had been a protestant chapel service at 6:30 in which I played on my "baby" Tailor guitar. The songs included the traditional candle lit "Silent Night". The congregation was a multi-national mix of races, ranks and uniforms (weapons on their hips or under the

chairs). They had paused to sink back into memories of families and faith, singing the timeless gentle songs albeit accompanied by the thrum of incoming choppers, and an ear cocked for more serious threats.

It was moving to be singing in the flickering light of the chapel tucked between blast walls even in a land far from "peace on earth". And it would be my last worship service in Iraq.

When I trudged back to my hooch after midnight in reflection, there remained some Christmas spirit; a few folks among the decorations, a few tunes here and there. The night was quiet with a sliver of a Babylon moon. I said a prayer that God would send a new kind of Christmas to Iraq in future years. Then I called Marti.

December 12

A Christmas Peace

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

– Matthew 11:28

Christmas Eve is a sacred time, brimming with anticipation and wonder. As a pastor, the day can also be a marathon of worship services, each one infused with its own beauty and meaning. I'll never forget one particular Christmas Eve that perfectly captured both the exhaustion and peace of the season.

That year, Christmas Eve fell on a Sunday. My day began at 7:00 a.m. with three morning services, followed by three evening Christmas Eve services. The culmination of the day was the midnight candlelight service, a cherished tradition in our church. As the sanctuary glowed with flickering candlelight and the voices of the congregation joined together in "Silent Night," I felt the weariness of the day melt away, replaced by the awe of Emmanuel—God with us.

When the service concluded, my work wasn't done. There were candles to put away, chairs to straighten, and doors to lock. By the time I left the building, it was 1:00 a.m. I had been there for eighteen hours, and every fiber of my being was ready for rest. But as I stepped outside into the stillness of the night, a deep peace settled over me.

Driving home, I didn't pass a single car. The world was quiet, wrapped in the stillness of Christmas morning. I thought of my family, already tucked into bed, and savored those final moments of solitude. The peace of that drive—after a day filled with the joy and beauty of worship—remains one of my favorite parts of celebrating Christmas. It was a moment when I truly felt the promise of Christ's presence, not just in the sanctuary but in the quiet places everywhere.

This story reminds me that even in our busiest, most exhausting seasons, God's peace is always near. Sometimes it comes in the stillness after the chaos, in a candlelit sanctuary, or a quiet drive home. It's a peace that transcends understanding and renews our weary souls.

As we celebrate this season, may we seek out those moments of stillness and allow the Prince of Peace to fill our hearts. Whether we find ourselves in the midst of joyful gatherings or quiet reflections, may we remember the promise of Christmas: that God is with us, even in the darkest hours, bringing light and rest for our souls.

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, thank You for the gift of Your peace. In the midst of busy days and long hours, help us to pause and remember Your presence. Teach us to find rest in You, knowing that You are Emmanuel—God with us. Fill our hearts with Your light and guide us in Your love this Christmas season. Amen.*

-Rev. Steven Martin

December 13

It was my first Christmas not going home to my parents' house. Since we'd married six years previously, Pat and I had spent Thanksgiving with his family and Christmas with mine. But in 1999, I was 8 months pregnant with our younger son, Stuart, and Blue Cross said no travel for me. We were still fairly new to the D.C. area, so we steeled ourselves for a lonelier, less joyful Christmas than usual. We would have to miss our cherished traditions, including our once-a-year trip to church on Christmas Eve with dear family friends.

We planned to attend a 4 p.m. Christmas Eve pageant at a local Episcopal church featuring two of our son Jeremy's friends, but Pat couldn't get out of work in time. I was annoyed – this Christmas was not starting off well -- but remembered reading about a family-friendly Methodist Church in Bethesda with a family service at 7 p.m. My mom and Pat's parents had all been raised in the Methodist church, so why not try that one?

Three year old Jeremy asked to sit in the front row of the balcony at Bethesda United Methodist Church -- a thrill for him, and a bit apart from the masses of strangers for Pat and me.

As the Children's Message began, kids gathered in the aisle and up front by the altar, but shy Jeremy stayed in the balcony with us. The pastor, Rev. Ron Foster, wandered down the center aisle, telling the children that Jesus is here, with us, but we're often too focused on the wrong things to notice His presence. As he spoke, kids started shouting and pointing at a large blimp labeled "Jesus is here!" that hovered near the ceiling, at eye level for those of us in the balcony. Jeremy's eyes grew wide as he joined in pointing and shouting.

"What?" Rev. Ron asked the kids. "Listen: Sometimes people don't notice when something special is right in front of them, like Jesus. They're not paying attention. What?"

There were big grins and palpable joy as the kids reacted to the message from their playful pastor, who pretended to be agog when he finally noticed the blimp; now everyone was in on the joke -- and was getting the message: Don't be too busy or distracted to notice Jesus here among us.

Talk about surprising. This was unlike any church service Pat or I had ever attended. It was engaging, thought-provoking, full of love and joy.

We didn't consider ourselves "churchy," but this place was worth exploring – and maybe more than just once a year on Christmas Eve.

We wound up raising our children as part of the BUMC community, immersing ourselves in musical groups, Sunday School, UMYF, retreats, mission trips, VBS, and so much more. The joy of that Christmas turned into a decades-long relationship with BUMC and Jesus.

Twenty-five years later, as chair of the Children's Ministry Committee, I help plan those Christmas Eve children's messages. There's something special about Christmas joy. When you share it, it can last longer than just one season. Sometimes, it can even change lives.

– Lisa Nevans Locke

December 14

A Verse and Blessing

Baruch 5: 1-5

Take off your mourning clothes and oppression, Jerusalem!

Dress yourself in the dignity of God's glory forever.

Wrap the justice that comes from God around yourself like a robe.

Place the eternal one's glory on your head like a crown.

God will show your brilliance everywhere under heaven.

God will give you this name by which to be called forever:

The Peace That Comes from Justice,

The Honor That Come from Reverence for God!

Get up, Jerusalem!

Stand on the high place and look around to the east!

See your children gathered from the west to the east

by the holy one's word as they rejoice that God has remembered them.

A Blessing

May God's Door of Welcome
swing open just a little bit more.

May Jesus' humble first dwelling

remind you of the plenty you already know.

And may the Spirit lead you into

more possibility and hospitality that you can imagine,

making room in The Inn for all.
May it be so.

“How Much is Enough?”

Third Week of Advent

December 16

When I was 12, I ended up in the hospital week before Christmas. And not only was I upset to be in the hospital over Christmas, but it was also the first time I was away from home for the holidays. Or it was the first time I would have been away if it hadn’t been for my dad.

When Christmas Eve came, many of the other kids were getting to go home temporarily for the holidays, but the doctors said that I had to stay in this hospital. So, I kept watching the other kids being picked up to go home for the holiday. To make matters worse, my mom could not be there because she had to do different things to get ready for the holiday and needed to be with my little sister.

Then, at the end of the work day on Christmas Eve, when all hope was lost, my Knight in shining armor showed up, my dad, and he told the doctors that I was coming home. And, no matter how hard they argued, he would not take no for an answer. So equipped with medicine and my dad, I headed home.

The unexpected was how much that Christmas meant to me. I remember every gift from that year, including a blue wool sweater from my favorite clothing store, which I still have. I also remember going to the church to light a candle. But more than the gifts, I remember my dad rescuing me and the surprise and joy on my mom’s face when we walked through the door unexpectedly. We were all joyful that Christmas; it was one of the best Christmases ever!

With no room at the inn and being away from her family, I bet this was also not the perfect picture of “Christmas” that Mary had in mind. I bet Mary was uncomfortable on the hay and unsure about giving birth in a stable. But I bet she also felt overwhelmed by the joy of holding her baby boy. I hope you all find that overwhelming joy with those you love, young and old.

December 17

The True Hope of Christmas

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

-John 1:5

Many years ago, my high school boyfriend gave me a Christmas gift that I have always remembered. On the surface, it seemed rather ordinary: a small, live Christmas tree not even two feet tall, its roots wrapped in dirty burlap. Along with the tree, he gave me a string of colored lights and a box or two of small glass ornaments.

My family already had its Christmas tree, so I set the little tree up in my bedroom. Decorated with the lights and ornaments, it looked festive and its piney aroma scented the air. I left the tree's lights on throughout the night because it was comforting to fall asleep in their soft glow. But the real magic happened when I awoke in the wee hours of the night and saw the lights, still glowing in the quiet house. I have searched many years, in vain, for the right words to express the deep sense of tranquility, safety, and wholeness that filled me as I gazed at the little tree and its lights. Maybe it was how the gentle light softened the familiar objects in my room, lending them a dreamy look. Maybe it was the sense that while the rest of the house slept, I was in a secret and sacred spot within the arc of those lights -- a place where I was fully known and fully loved. Whatever the cause, I had a sense that, somehow, all was well in the world. A sense that Christ had arrived, that His kingdom had indeed come among us. A sense of the true hope of Christmas.

After New Year's, I planted the tree in our yard. Because the ground was frozen, I couldn't dig very deep and sadly, the tree didn't survive. But although the tree is gone, that memory of wonder, hope, and peace still lingers. I get a whisper of it on Christmas Eve when I see our church lit by candles while the congregation sings Silent Night. My wish is that each of us may experience the true hope of Christmas this year, and always.

December 18

Unexpected Christmas, Unexpected God!

Have you ever gotten something for Christmas that was totally unexpected? It could've been a special gift or a visit from someone. On the flip side have you ever expected a certain gift or visit from someone and ended up being disappointed? I was looking at this online forum titled, "Did anyone get something for Christmas they didn't expect." The best one was someone got a ticket to Hawaii. Then on the other end of the spectrum someone received a toothbrush, toothpaste and some breath mints for Christmas-and I don't think they weren't expecting that. This person probably needed these items but he wasn't too pleased to get them. There were some things that happened on that first Christmas that were quite unexpected.

God unexpectedly became human and dwelt among us

This is the first and greatest truth of Christmas. God is with us. The Bible says, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). We do not work our way to God but in Christ, God comes to us. If you've ever felt like God is indifferent or uncaring toward you, remember the story of Christmas. Remember that God pursued you in Christ, and He continues to do so. We do not worship a distant God but rather a dwelling God – the God who makes His home among us, the God who is Immanuel, the God who is with us!

"Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means 'God is with us'" (Matthew 1:23 NLT).

God is immeasurably great and unexpectedly humble.

Christmas is a time to marvel in awe and gratitude at the lengths God has gone to show us His love and to save us. The Creator came to His creation. The God of Heaven came to earth. The infinite God became an infant son. The Lord, whose royal robe filled the temple of heaven (Isaiah 6:1), became a baby who was wrapped in swaddling cloths (Luke 2:7). The God of the universe, who is present everywhere, did not have a room to be born in. The Son of God left His throne in heaven, surrounded by the unceasing praise of angels, to come to earth where He would ultimately receive a crown of thorns and hear crowds shouting, "Crucify him!" (Mark 15:13).

At Christmas, we stand in awe at the majesty and humility of God. He came not in power to kings in a palace but in humility to ordinary shepherds in a small rural town of obscurity. The Lord comes to us not with angry fist, shouting from heaven, but with an open hand and helpless cry from a manger.

"She gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7 ESV).

God unexpectedly includes all in His kingdom – The Christmas great joy for all people. The angel announced to the shepherds "good news of great joy that will be for all people." (Luke 2:10 ESV).

Good news. Great joy. For all people. That's the wonderful proclamation of Christmas in a nutshell.

The good news is that we have a Savior, Jesus Christ. And it is good news – not good advice or good teaching but good news. That means something happened. God came to us in the person of Jesus. He came into our real world, in a real place, and really lived among us, and really died for our sins and really rose from the dead. And He really offers us the free gift of salvation. It's the best news!

And it is news for all people. No one is outside the reach of God's grace in Christ. All are welcome to come Jesus, no matter who you are, what you've done, or whatever your background – all are welcome to come to Jesus and receive His free gift of salvation. It is greatest gift that leads to the greatest joy – the joy of knowing Jesus, of living with hope, of being adopted into God's family, and knowing your future is secure in heaven.

"The angel said to them, 'Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord'" (Luke 2:10–11 ESV).

How can bring this home?

Advent is not just about looking back to Christ's birth in His first coming but also about looking forward to His second coming. Just as Israel awaited the coming of the Messiah, so we too await in eager anticipation for the Lord to return to make all things right and all things new. Consider the lyrics of the beloved Christmas hymn, Joy to the World, in light of the return of Christ.

"Joy to the world! / The Lord is come / Let earth receive her King! / Let every heart prepare Him room / And heaven and nature sing / And heaven and nature sing. / He rules the world with truth and grace / And makes the nations prove / The glories of His righteousness / And wonders of His love."

The repeated promise of the New Testament is that Jesus will come again as the King of Kings to reign over all the earth in righteousness, truth, and grace. We will dwell with Him forever, rejoice in the wonders of His love, and "He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever" (Revelation 21:4 NLT).

"Christ was offered once for all time as a sacrifice to take away the sins of many people. He will come again, not to deal with our sins, but to bring salvation to all who are eagerly waiting for him" (Hebrews 9:28 NLT).

Prayer:

Father, thank you for sending your Son to save me! Help me to always rejoice in my salvation – and give me the words and opportunity to tell others about the wonderful, free gift of salvation. In Jesus' name, amen.

Lord, thank you for giving me a living hope. Help me to live in light of eternity, looking forward to your coming and telling the world of the wonders of your love. In Jesus name, amen.

Pastor Julio Da Silva

December 19

I brought my Mom to live with me from her home in Illinois after Christmas in 2012. She had dementia and it was becoming increasingly clear to my brothers and me that she could no longer live alone. Since the three of us were scattered from several hours to hundreds of miles away, we couldn't check on her as often as she needed. She lived with me until her death in October 2015.

Taking care of a parent while working full time and trying to have time with friends was very tough for me. Luckily, one brother came and took my Mom home to his house in Illinois for Christmas week each year. It gave me a break and time to freely spend time with friends without having to think about paid care-givers and when they had to leave. It also gave me time to myself and to just relax and be. As an introvert, being able to be by myself was an unexpected blessing. It allowed me to read, relax, and just relish a quiet house without having to cook, clean, etc.

Another unexpected outcome was worshipping on Christmas Eve. While for most, it's a time for family, for me it's a chance to attend worship in a beautiful sanctuary, listening to many voices together in song, and saying Merry Christmas to many before heading home. Seeing the candles lit during Silent Night, listening to the bells, choir, and trumpets, as well as our beautiful organ leaves me at peace. It brought me joy during my time of reprieve from care-giving, and still brings me joy today.

I miss my Mom, but know she's in heaven with my Dad, grandmother and grandfather, and her brothers and sisters. She is not alone and neither are we as we live in the love of both Christ and Christmas.

- Jodie Paustin

December 20

Healing Heartache in Hawaii

Ten years ago, we planned a family vacation in Hawaii. At the time, my mother was living with us. She was just as excited as we were to make an exotic trip at Christmas, an unusual departure from our typical holiday traditions in Maryland. A longer than usual school break for our sons Reid and Sidney would give us time to enjoy Hawaii.

Planning in September, we settled on a travel package from Costco. Our destination included Oahu and Maui with a week spent on each island. We secured our trip investment with travel insurance and started dreaming about the adventures we would have. We looked forward to rest and renewal.

A month later our lives were turned upside down. A tragic accident took the life of David's sister and only sibling. Rebecca Lowery was driving her FJ Cruiser on Falls Road in Baltimore when a cascade of trees, the earth around them too soft to hold them from heavy rain days before, fell and struck her truck. She was killed instantly. It was October 22, 2014.

Rebecca was joyful. Exuberant, adventurous, and loving are qualities she shared abundantly with all who knew her. She was excited about our trip to Hawaii. Just a week before her death, she expressed interest in going to Hawaii with us.

Anyone familiar with sudden loss and grief understands the agony we were experiencing. Blinding and unstoppable tears. Foggy days. Sleepless nights. It would be a very long journey through grief.

We had to decide what to do about our trip to Hawaii. Ultimately, we decided to forgo a claim on our travel insurance. Going to Hawaii would be what Rebecca would have wanted. Christmas in Hawaii was always going to be different. Little did we know that Hawaii would be a retreat offering us peace and comfort in mourning.

At the time and all of these years later looking back, we know Hawaii was God's provision and timing which are always perfect. Hawaii is where God started healing our heartache. Mahalo God!

Rachelle Cummins

(May anyone who needs special comfort at this time, join us online or in person for our Blue Christmas Service on Sunday, December 22 at 7:00 p.m. and may you all find peace and comfort.)

December 21

A Verse

Isaiah 12: 2-6

God is indeed my salvation;
I will trust and won't be afraid.
Yah, the Lord, is my strength and my shield;
he has become my salvation.
You will draw water with joy from the springs of salvation.
And you will say on that day:
"Thank the Lord; call on God's name;
proclaim God's deeds among the peoples;
declare that God's name is exalted.
Sing to the Lord, who has done glorious things;
proclaim this throughout all the earth."
Shout and sing for joy, city of Zion,
because the holy one of Israel is great among you.

A Blessing

May God's Door of Welcome
swing open just a little bit more.
May Jesus' humble first dwelling
remind you of the plenty you already know.
And may the Spirit lead you into
more possibility and hospitality that you can imagine,
making room in The Inn for all.
May it be so.

A Room with a View

Fourth Week of Advent

December 22

Read this out loud, and together if you are with others…

Love waits for us at Advent
Love waits for us to care.
Love waits for our compassion
freely offered, freely shared.

In this time of preparation
for the work of co-creation,
for the birthing of a world
where faith shapes all we do.
Love is born in us anew!

Light four candles.

Today I add the Light of Love, along with Joy, Hope and Peace,
to illumine the Door of Welcome.
May this light shine in my heart, in my life, and in this community.
May Love awaken us to possibilities and lead us to greater hospitality.
There IS room in this Inn, a House for the Holy.

December 23

(We hope you can join us tomorrow, and wherever you are we hope you are preparing for the Christ Child's coming into the world please prepare your hearts by reading these words from Luke.)

The Birth of Jesus

2 In those days a decree went out
from Caesar Augustus that all the
world should be registered. 2 This was
the first registration and was taken
while Quirinius was governor of Syria.
3 All went to their own towns to be
registered. 4 Joseph also went from the
town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea,
to the city of David called Bethlehem,
because he was descended from the
house and family of David. 5 He went
to be registered with Mary, to whom he
was engaged and who was expecting a
child. 6 While they were there, the time
came for her to deliver her child. 7 And
she gave birth to her firstborn son and
wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid
him in a manger, because there was no
place in the guest room.

The Shepherds and the Angels

8 Now in that same region there were
shepherds living in the fields, keeping
watch over their flock by night. 9 Then
an angel of the Lord stood before them,
and the glory of the Lord shone around
them, and they were terrified. 10 But the
angel said to them, "Do not be afraid,
for see, I am bringing you good news
of great joy for all the people: 11 to you
is born this day in the city of David a
Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.
12 This will be a sign for you: you will
find a child wrapped in bands of cloth
and lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly
there was with the angel a multitude of
the heavenly host, praising God and
saying,

14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven,

and on earth peace among those
whom he favors!"

15 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." 16 So they went with
haste and found Mary and Joseph and
the child lying in the manger. 17 When
they saw this, they made known what
had been told them about this child,
18 and all who heard it were amazed
at what the shepherds told them, 19
and Mary treasured all these words
and pondered them in her heart. 20
The shepherds returned, glorifying and
praising God for all they had heard and
seen, just as it had been told them.

Jesus Is Named

21 When the eighth day came, it was
time to circumcise the child, and he was
called Jesus, the name given by the
angel before he was conceived in the
womb.

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For unto us a Child is born,
Unto us a Son is given; And
the government will be
upon His shoulder. And
His name will be called
Wonderful, Counselor,
Mighty God, Everlasting
Father, Prince of Peace.

- Isaiah 9:6

ADVENT 2024