

2019 Advent Devotional Collection
✝ South Mecklenburg Presbyterian Church

Advent Devotionals



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.” Luke 2:10

We invite you to enter into the season of Advent by experiencing a joyful SMPC tradition - the 15th annual South Mecklenburg Presbyterian Church Advent Devotional Collection. Since 2005, SMPC members have written heart-felt reflections to share with our church family, and our children have created precious illustrations for this project.

Beginning the first Sunday in Advent, and continuing through Christmas Day, we encourage you to engage in the daily spiritual practices of scripture reading, reflection, and prayer. Whether you read from the printed booklet or experience the devotionals online, we hope you will be inspired as you wait in hope for the birth of our Lord.

Thank you to all our generous SMPC authors and illustrators for sharing your stories with us.

The 2019 South Mecklenburg Presbyterian Church Advent Devotional Collection is available in booklet form (one per family, please) and online at www.SMPChome.org. Please feel free to share this collection with your family, neighbors, and friends.



Brooke Hicks, Age 13

First Sunday of Advent, December 1, 2019



And the angel said unto them, “Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.” Luke 2:10

Every square inch of my kitchen counter was covered with cookies. There were frosted cut outs, chocolate chip, lemon drops, ginger snaps, and whoopie pies just to name a few. Fifty-two dozen cookies donated by friends and family. It was amazing to see what a few could accomplish for many. On the first Saturday in December, my husband, kids, mother-in-law, and I loaded up the car “Tetris style” with all those delectable treats and set off for Urban Ministry Center. Upon arrival, we set up a table and created a “cookie buffet” in the lunchroom. Each neighbor was able to fill a bag to bursting with the Christmas goodies of their choice.

The holidays can be an especially trying time for those experiencing homelessness, sparking loneliness and depression among the most vulnerable in our community. But something magical happened that day. We watched some of the neighbors “go home” for the holidays. Folks would light up when they saw a particular cookie and say something like “my mom used to make those for Christmas” or “my grandma made the best chocolate chip cookies.” Occasionally, it would be followed by a short story from a childhood that didn’t sound so different from mine. I expected the ornately decorated cut outs or cookies with fancy sprinkles to be the preference but was surprised to see so many gravitate toward chocolate chip, oatmeal raisin, and Rice Krispies treats. They were the foods that reminded them of childhood. Family. Home. A simpler time filled with simple pleasures. In that moment, we brought tidings of comfort and joy. That’s what the birth of Jesus brings to us all. Comfort and Joy. May we give and receive those tidings with open hearts.

Dear Lord, the least, the last, and the lost cry out. Attune our ears to their cries and guide us to respond with tidings of comfort and joy in your name. Amen

If you would like to share joy with our Urban Ministry neighbors on December 7, please sign up at www.smpchome.org/serve to donate cookies and join us caroling!

Shelby Ullman



Miles Ullman, Age 5

Monday, December 2, 2019



Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord.

Psalm 27:14

In thinking about writing about Christmas, I began to reflect on two elements of the season. The first element is "waiting." Advent is all about waiting. I can so deeply relate to this. I had wanted to have children since I was a young woman. The circumstances of my life had not allowed that to happen. At 30 years of age I decided that I would be a whole, healthy person if I were to be childless. I felt that I could enjoy the children of others or work with children. When I married my husband, he already had three children who became "my" children immediately. When I was 35, I had a child of my own and felt the joy that I had anticipated. Subsequently, I had another child and adopted yet another child. It was all worth the wait.

The second element that my reflection brought was thinking of young Mary, traveling with her husband to a place she did not know to deliver her child with people she did not know. In the Jewish tradition, women were able to be together for times of birth, often encouraging and helping with the birth. We don't know if Mary had any family with her, but she was certainly not able to have her whole family and friends with her. Mary was not even able to have a home or inn in which to have her son; only a lowly stable. I can't imagine how scared she must have been to have all this happen when she was so young. I can relate to this as I had moved with my husband and the three children to Hong Kong when I was four months pregnant with my first baby, Cameron. The contrast to me is so stark. I was older when I had the baby and with the best care available. I had taken my immediate family with me. I knew that my parents would be able to come to Hong Kong after the baby was born and we could talk by phone any time I wished. This year as I celebrate the Advent season and Christmas, I will have a new appreciation for the journey that Mary and Joseph made.

Dear Heavenly Father, help us to slow down this Advent season and wait for Emmanuel, God with us. Help us keep our hearts in readiness for the coming of Christ. Help each of us to find the quiet we need to celebrate this season with reverence and joy. In Jesus' name, Amen

Mrna Dibble



Emery Hicks, Age 9

Tuesday, December 3, 2019

The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want... Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Psalms 23:1, 6

I want it now. Those words seem to echo throughout the world in which we live. As a child, we often would express our wants to our parents and to Santa Claus in hope that our wants would be fulfilled. However, as we learned the true meaning of Christmas, we discovered that our needs are so much more important than our wants. We understood that the birth of our savior represented the fulfillment of our needs. Our wants are things that we can live without.

Throughout 2007, our family grappled with "Why is our Lord not meeting our want of a child?" We had been struggling through the process of adoption for almost two years, with many setbacks and periods of doubt as to whether we would be able to complete the process. However, the Lord had in his mind the child that would make our family complete. On October 22, 2007, as we walked into the orphanage in Kotelnich, Russia, our hearts raced as we realized that our dream was about to come true and doubts seemed to flood our minds, as we began to question as to whether we were truly ready to be parents and responsible for the growth and development of a son. However, when George Hamilton's caregivers walked out with him and we saw the twinkle in his eyes, we knew that the Lord had worked one of his miracles. He blessed our family with the completion of the adoption of our son in November 2007. As a result, our son was home with us for Christmas 2007. As we reflect on the process, we understand that God was there every step of the way, as he understood that George would meet our needs to share our love and that we would meet George's needs for loving parents.

Lord, Help us to understand the difference between needs and wants. Let us understand that in your divine plan, you will meet our needs and to not lose sight that all will be in accordance with your plans for each of us. Let us remember at Christmas that through the birth of your son, our needs will be met. Amen

Mary and Dean Elledge

*Originally appeared in the
2008 Advent Devotional Guide*



***St. Basil's Cathedral
George Elledge, Age 12***

Wednesday, December 4, 2019



Romans 12:1 So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going to work and walking around life – and place it before God as an offering. Romans 12:1 (The Message)

Christmas . . . a time of waiting . . . a time of excitement . . . decorating the Christmas tree, the house and yard, cooking/baking, parties, family, church, gifts, travel, special events, TV/Social media, holiday specials, traditions . . . WHOA!

Christmas . . . a time of loss . . . a time of sad memories . . . a time of waiting. . . for medical results, healing, dealing with sickness, chemo, heavy grief, making funeral arrangements, past hurts and offenses, hunger, not enough money . . . WHOA!

Can I do this again? I am waiting for the good times to come back, but they never do. The loss is real, things will never be the same. When three significant people in my family died in a six- month time period, I knew things would never be the same. That year I only had the energy to put lights on a Christmas tree. There had to be a way to honor my loved ones and memories during the holiday.

Make new traditions: light candles; make a memory/healing ornament; paint or design a stone; create a healing/memory box writing 30 messages from family and friends or positive words and quotes to read daily. Just cooking/baking with friends and family and sharing stories of my journeys with hurts, pains, and difficult events was a soothing balm to my heart.

Every major life change stimulates a type of grieving. Things will not be the same. Honor where you are. Allow space and know that your feelings are OK. Be aware of your limits and accept that you don't have to do all the holiday activities. Find a professional, a friend, a pastor, to help with your grief.

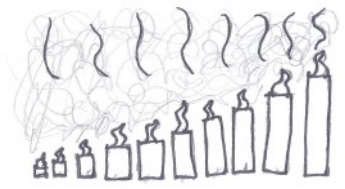
Empower yourself by incorporating your healing journeys into your holiday plans. "The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depth." - Dr. Elizabeth Kubler Ross.

You, just being the best you, in your walk in life, is a gift to God. Believe it!

Our Heavenly Father, thank you for the gift of life. Thank you for feelings. Thank you that we can hold space and live with these feelings. Thank you for the family of God. Thank you for loving me just the way I am today, heartache, loss, healing, and anger. May your love, forgiveness, and grace given to us by Your only son Jesus Christ sustain us in our walk on earth. Amen

Mandy Godbey

If you or someone you know is approaching the Advent season with a heavy heart, please join us on Sunday, December 15, 4:00 p.m. in the Chapel for our Longest Night Service.



Addison Hicks, Age 13

Thursday, December 5, 2019

Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. Hebrews 13:16

Serve the Lord with gladness; Come before Him with joyful singing. Psalm 100:2

Last December, I had the opportunity to participate in the annual Salvation Army Red Kettle campaign. Terry Gaines invited me to volunteer with her as a "bell ringer." Bell ringing for the Salvation Army has been a shared tradition for Terry and her father for many years in the Atlanta area, and I was thrilled to be able to serve alongside her in our own community of Charlotte.

We arrived at the StoneCrest Harris Teeter to begin our shift one December evening. We transitioned the bells and the Salvation Army aprons from the last set of volunteers. Terry provided me with a fun Santa hat and peppermint candy canes to share with those who donated to the kettle.

Shortly after we began ringing our bells, some friends began to show up. I was so happy to see so many of our friends and even more thrilled that they donated to the Kettle. I really thought it was coincidence that they showed up at Harris Teeter that night. I had no idea that our friends were showing up because Terry had sent an email to them in advance and invited them to stop by and share a few coins in honor of my December birthday celebration. Wow! It was truly special to be a bell ringer and then how meaningful to have friends donate. What an amazing gift that would benefit those in need!

We had a lovely evening singing Christmas carols, bell ringing and sharing smiles with all who walked in and out of the grocery store. It was heartwarming to see so many people, including our friends, give so graciously to such a worthy charity and to know that these donations would help so many in our Charlotte community. A few folks who stopped by that evening even shared their own personal story of when the Salvation Army had helped them and how much it meant to them to drop some change in the kettle. It was such an honor and a privilege to ring the bell for the Salvation Army.

Gracious and loving God, help us to remember that we are called to be the hands and feet of Christ this Advent season and throughout the year to help others in need. We ask that you help us to be intentional about serving your people and to share the love of Christ in all that we do. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

Leisa Lackey

If you would like to ring to bring joy to our Charlotte neighbors served by the Salvation Army, go to smphome.org and click on "serve" to access the Signup Genius link. SMPC has reserved 24 bell ringing sessions at the Harris Teeter locations at StoneCrest and Blakeney shopping centers.



Olivia Smith, Age 11

Friday, December 6, 2019

And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. Colossians 3:14-16

Christmas to me is all about Jesus and his gift to us in this life. And what a gift that is!! One of the greatest blessings is family - both our blood and our church family. And especially during the Advent season, my family strives to show each other and our friends how much we love them.

When Jesus was asked what the most important commandment was, he responded with, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength." And the second is very much like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:39). I have tried to teach my children this important principle. Christmastime is a natural time that we go out of our way to do this. Whether it is serving meals at a homeless shelter or donating money and supplies to help those in need, we do our best to show others our love for them - especially those who may feel alone during the holiday season.

We are blessed to be surrounded by a close-knit family that we spend every Christmas with and celebrate the real reason for this season – our LOVE for God, Jesus and one another. My husband's family is a perfect example of love, giving and what it means to be Christians. We have suffered much more loss recently than in years past and we will be missing my mother-in-law and sweet niece this Christmas. It's still hard to grasp and we miss them dearly. At the same time, it helps us to appreciate each other even more and not get upset over things that are truly not worth it. We hope to show others our love and appreciation this holiday season every chance we get.

A few years ago, I had surgery right before the holidays and was unable to do much at all. I was worried about getting everything done for work, in the house, for the boys and the rest of my family. My amazing neighbor and friend, Mary Katheryne Zagora, came over and completely decorated my Christmas tree. It was the most touching act of love and I will never forget it. My tree looked amazing that year, too. She did a way better job than I had ever done. That act of love and kindness is what it is all about. May we all show our love toward others in the best ways we know how this Advent season.

Dear Lord, this holiday season let us all be thankful for our friends, family and the many blessings bestowed upon us. Let us reach out to others during this time, and all year long, to make sure others know they are loved and cared for and not alone. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Heather Carpenter



Savannah Brown, Age 5

Saturday, December 7, 2019



O sing unto the Lord a new song: sing unto the Lord, all the earth. Sing unto the Lord, bless his name; shew forth his salvation from day to day. Psalm 96: 1-2

Like most families, there are cherished memories and traditions that are unique for Advent and Christmas. Christmas through the eyes of your children makes this season even more joyous and special. One in particular for our family, even though many years ago, will forever remain indelibly marked in my memory. Every Advent season, our Presbyterian Church in Red Bank, New Jersey, held what they called a "Round the Table Sing" in the meeting hall where carols were sung and culminated with singing the song "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" and serving cookies. At the time, we had three young daughters who used our car keys as percussion instruments on the table to accompany the singing. Even as they grew older they always became so excited about attending the "Round the Table Sing" and it marked the beginning of the Advent season for our family. To this day, I can still see the joy and excitement in their eyes from the singing and banging of keys to the rhythm of the carols. In some part, I also believe, it played a large part in our daughters' joy of singing and honoring Christ through song.

Dear Lord, as we enter the Advent season, keep us ever mindful of what the birth of Christ truly means not only during the Christmas season, but throughout the year. May we celebrate His teachings by loving others, singing His praises and caring for those who are less fortunate. Amen

Kurt Weinheimer



Olivia Smith, Age 11

Second Sunday of Advent, December 8, 2019



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

My friends, acquaintances and family asked, “why are you going to Haiti?” I was so excited when I found out about the tie between SMPC and Actionnel’s work in Bayonnais. My dad always wanted to go to Haiti. He was glued to the TV when the earthquake hit, seeing the destruction and hearing of all the children who were orphaned. He began to support a Croatian priest who worked in an orphanage in Haiti. So why did all of this affect him so much? Dad was born in 1920, the son of Croatian immigrants in Chicago. His mom died when he was two and his dad died when he was 13. His stepmother had three boys to raise. She kept the oldest at home as he was close to graduating from high school, sent my dad to live on his uncle’s farm in Wisconsin, put her own son in an orphanage, and scrubbed floors to keep them afloat.

Like the people of Bayonnais, my dad could make something out of nothing. Pictures do not really show how hard they work: building bridges by hand; carrying water; high school students walking down the mountain two hours to come to school; moms bathing their children and washing clothes in the river; men using mattocks to cultivate the land; and hardworking teachers with only a chalk board for instruction. The students eat their meal of rice and beans in the courtyard. The young people and adult choirs rehearse outside for services.

As SMPC continues to sponsor students, participate in the alternative gift market, pray for our fellow Christians in Bayonnais, and periodic visits, what has the school and our support provided for Bayonnais? **HOPE** - an education provides a way for a brighter future. Some of the teachers are products of the school; some of the students have gone into the medical field; and an accounting program is in the works. **HOPE**

In 2019 I realized my dad’s dream and, for me personally as a French speaker, I was able to engage many in conversation --even a farmer leading his cow to water. I am so thankful for my time in Bayonnais.

Dear Heavenly Father, please help us to look outside this cocoon of wealth and peace to the needs of God’s people around the world. May the hope of Jesus’ ministry be spread wherever we go and let us always remember to do it to one of the least of these for we are all the family of God. Amen



Alix Pavlic Phillips

Evan Williams, Age 12

Monday, December 9, 2019

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me. Matthew 25: 35-36

Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. 1 Peter 4:10

Life has proved to be a journey!

I wrote my last Advent devotional six years ago. I talked about the musical gifts that had been restored to me after five years of chronic pain and illness. Well, six months later, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I wasn't really afraid; my Dad had survived four different cancers at that point and was with me on my journey. But, as my treatment came to an end, something had triggered in me - I had become a full-blown alcoholic. Luckily, that way of life was short-lived - I am five years sober in December- but the journey was life changing.

Through the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, I was able to finally find that spiritual connection with God that I had long craved. The basic tenants of the program are to develop a relationship with God, rely on him, and help others.

This year, that journey led me to Loaves & Fishes. Each Friday, a team from SMPC volunteers at the food pantry to assist clients in need of some help. We "shop" with those referred to us so that they can feed their families. Something has typically happened: a bad stroke of luck, an illness, an accident. One gentleman in a wheelchair and casts on his arm and leg had been the victim of a shooting.

Working with our neighbors in need, I have found an inner calmness and peace that I didn't know was in me. Many of them just need somebody to listen, and through the grace of God, I have found that very easy to do (it has to be God, because this is not a normal behavior for me). There is never judgment, just love and understanding. Some of the stories are heartbreaking. One of the amazing things is the continued theme from our clients – how grateful THEY are for what they do have, and the vast majority are extremely spiritual people, relying on God to get them through. I leave exhausted physically but am enriched spiritually.

God, I offer myself to Thee - to build with me and to do with me as Thou wilt. Relieve me of the bondage of self, that I may better do Thy will. Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help of Thy Power, Thy Love and Thy Way of life. May I do Thy will always!

Alcoholics Anonymous – 3rd Step Prayer

Patti Kelly



Brooke Hicks, Age 13

Tuesday, December 10, 2019

Have no anxiety, but in everything make your requests known to God in prayer and petition with thanksgiving. Then the peace of God, which is beyond our utmost understanding, will keep guard over your hearts and your thoughts, in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:6-7

Advent is a time of anticipation. However, in our culture, we do not anticipate much. We have 24-hour superstores and fast food. There are not too many things that we have to wait for. Yet, when I am forced to spend some unexpected time waiting, I often experience a feeling of gratitude. As I stand in a long line at the grocery store, I realize how fortunate I am to be able to fill my cart with an enormous bounty without worrying about how to pay for it. It always humbles me when I pull up to a gas pump to fill up my SUV and see that the person who was there before me only got a few dollars' worth.

I try to be thankful when the unexpected happens. Being stuck in traffic may make me late, but it often offers perspective. When one of my children gets sick, it alters my plans for the week, but I am reminded of parents whose entire lives have been transformed by children who are always sick and will never recover. I then say a prayer of thanksgiving for healthy children. When I am frantically preparing for company, I try to be grateful for extended family and friends because so many people are alone and do not have anyone who visits them.

During this busy season, it is easy for me to get caught up in the worldly preparations of decorating, cooking, shopping, wrapping, mailing, and doing everything else that must be done. However, when a hindrance arises, I hope to gain perspective and then say a prayer of thanksgiving and gratitude.

Lord, you have been so good to us and we thank you for our many blessings. Grant us perspective to see the true meaning of Christmas. Help us to be still and know that you are God. Amen

Wendy Sinclair

*Originally appeared in the 2009 SMPC
Advent Devotional Guide*



Ryan Wooley, Age 5

Wednesday, December 11, 2019

Addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart. Ephesians 5:19

This past March I joined our SMPC Choir. I was drawn to the infectious joy of our new organist and music director, Zach Bowyer, and immediately felt embraced by my fellow musicians. Through Wednesday night choir practices and singing during Sunday worship services I feel closer to God. I have found that music is one of the ways in which I can express my love for God. It is said that music that honors God will cause our hearts to sing, and when our hearts sing, worship happens. What a privilege it is to be part of our worship service.

Growing up in Iowa I was always part of the choir in our Presbyterian church. Now I've come full circle, enjoying this very special family of singers. My hope for the future is that more people will want to join the choir and fill our beautiful sanctuary with the joyful songs to our Heavenly Father.

As Christmas approaches, I look forward to joining with our congregation to sing the age-old Christmas hymns and anthems, glowing candles, smiling faces, singing of Jesus' birth and God's love filling our hearts with love and joy.

Thank you, God, for the gift of music and friendship. May your presence be felt in the hymns we sing, and may we be drawn to you. Amen

Barb Malo



Blayke McDonnell, Age 6

Thursday, December 12, 2019



Some friends play at friendship, but a true friend sticks closer than one's nearest kin.

Proverbs 18:24

It is my hope that most of you have great memories of Christmas. Whether they are your own childhood memories, or those as a parent of your own children, precious memories are etched in our minds forever.

As Jennifer and I became empty nesters over the past several years, our children left the security of home and ventured on to beginning cherished memories of their own. It wasn't until Christmas 2015 that for the first time, we did not have all of our children together at Christmas. Nicky was in South Korea working, and one of our family's favorite times of the year is the candlelight Christmas Eve service at SMPC. It is always a great night to celebrate Jesus' birth and share that not only with our own family, but also our church family. It hit me then that this is what our parents had felt when Jennifer and I had moved away and left our close families to begin our family.

Each year after, those Christmas Eve services would have fewer of our children there, as did our friends whose children had also moved away or started their own families.

Nicky once said, *"you really only have a few true friends in life, the rest are just acquaintances"*. This past year we celebrated two family weddings – our children Andrew and Jenna were both married. It was during those weddings that we realized just how important our SMPC family had become; they were not just friends, but family. Both weddings had a lot of family and many friends travel long distances to attend, but at the end of each celebration, we found ourselves, not with our families, but our SMPC "family," our *true* friends. The evenings were spent laughing about the past 20+ years and whose wedding we will be attending next. As Dr. Matt Brown mentioned in a sermon a few weeks later, we didn't want the night to end!

So please cherish the true meaning of Christmas this season and also enjoy and treasure your friends at SMPC.

Dear God, thank you for giving us your son, and for friends who share his love. Amen

Ken Vaught



Clara Guzman, Age 7

Friday, December 13, 2019



Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! Psalm 95:1-2

Long before smiling emojis animated our electronic messages, there was the yellow “smiley face” graphic. It was created by an ad agency in 1963 – the same year I was born. And according to one of my childhood photo albums, the smiley face was popular in my family the Christmas of 1971.

There I am, cheesing for the camera and holding a clear plastic purse with an enormous yellow smiley face in the center. My two sisters and I received yellow plastic mugs, bearing a grin on both sides, in our Christmas stockings. I drank milk and hot chocolate from mine until I left home for college. My mug now resides in my kitchen cabinet; the “T” on the bottom, which I painted with fingernail polish, proves it is mine.

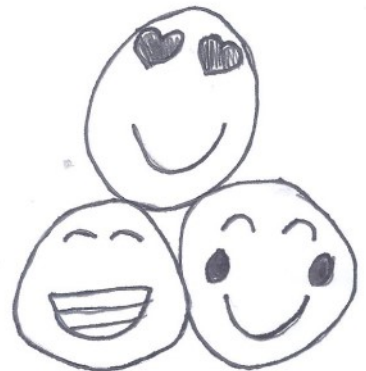
What I also see in that 1971 blurry photo is my Mom sitting back watching our reactions, and I now know that feeling – Yes! All the stress, planning and worry led us to this happy moment. Though I cannot see them, there were no doubt handmade outfits under that tree that Mom created for her girls.

What my heart sees when I look at that Christmas photo is gratitude. I am grateful for the traditions; the thoughtful gifts; the understanding we shared about Jesus’ birth, life and ministry; the family members who would continue to embrace their faith and serve others; and an awareness that God was present with us at every graduation, wedding, birth, illness, surgery, celebration of life and every moment of every day.

Diana Butler Bass, author of *Grateful: The Subversive Practice of Giving Thanks* says, “Gratitude is contagious. It can spread from heart to heart.” Thank you, my SMPC family, for infecting me... lol, heart eyes emoji.

Loving God, thank you for this community of faith where we experience joy every time we come together. With grateful hearts, we ask you to use us to be ambassadors of your love and your peace this Advent season and always. Amen

Terry Gaines



Adeline Bayer, Age 8

Saturday, December 14, 2019

He went with Mary, his fiancée, who was pregnant. While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. She gave birth to a son, her firstborn. She wrapped him in a blanket and laid him in a manger, because there was no room in the hostel. Luke 2: 5-7

When our children, Amy and Will, were very young, we began a tradition that, at the time, we didn't realize would become a tradition. Donna's parents were finally empty nesters after raising eight children. We invited them to join us Christmas morning to watch the kids open their presents. Bill would then read the Christmas story and we would have a large breakfast. Grandpa farmed and had to do chores every morning, including Christmas. He would get up earlier than normal, but, even so, sometimes the kids would have to wait for them to arrive. The anticipation Amy and Will experienced was sometimes unbearable, but the calm Christmas morning with just the six of us gathered together was something we will always treasure. The rest of the day became hectic and was spent with seven brothers, sisters, spouses and all the grandchildren (usually over 30 of us). Grandma and Grandpa continued to come to our home every Christmas morning, even after the kids were grown. After Grandpa passed away, Grandma continued to join us up until after her great-grandchild (her 19th and our first grandchild) was born.

We continue this tradition now. When we still lived on the farm, we would make the 3.5 hour trek to Amy's and Dan's home in Chicago to experience the same joy my parents felt to watch our grandchildren on Christmas morning. Now we are just a few miles apart but, sometimes, they still have to wait for us to get there. The anticipation of that morning celebration of God's gift to us is well worth the wait.

Gracious God, forgive us for our impatience. Thank you for the gifts you pour on us each day. Please give us the wisdom and courage to be your patient and persistent servants in this time and this place. Amen

Donna and Bill Ramsey



Natalie Guy, Age 8

Third Sunday of Advent, December 15, 2019



Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises. Psalm 47:6

When I was a small child, Christmas was full of joy. My family would get together at my grandparents' beautifully decorated home, eat wonderful food, and open fantastic gifts. However, when I was 12 my world came crashing in on me. My parents announced that they were going to divorce. In the years after, Christmas became a hectic time full of stress and pain. Oh we still had the decorations, food, and presents. But it was not the same. Each year my brother William and I got passed back and forth between families for multiple Christmas events. It was impossible to fit us into everyone's schedule. This would spark disagreements between my parents. Often I felt like a ping-pong ball bouncing back and forth, trying to make everyone happy.

Christmas did not become joyful for me again until I was a junior in high school. That year I decided to go to church more often and join the choir. I'm not sure what motivated me to make that decision. It was almost on whim. However, I am very thankful that God led me in that direction.

Christmas became magical for me again. Through the beautiful music, I learned to appreciate the true joy of Christmas. While practicing the music repeatedly to be ready for the Christmas Eve service, the meaning behind those songs began to sink into my heart. I came to realize that the hectic schedule and the stress were small annoyances if I concentrated on the meaning behind the music. God loved me so much that he sent his own Son to earth for me.

Dear Lord, thank you for the gift of music. Please allow everyone to listen and focus on the beautiful messages God is sending us through talented musicians. Help us all to feel the joy of the best gift ever, your Son. Amen

Amanda Alford

*Appeared in SMPC's 2006
Advent Devotional Guide*



Adeline Bayer, Age 8

Monday, December 16, 2019



And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

1 Corinthians 13:13

Every year, my extended family – cousins, aunts and uncles – come to Charlotte to celebrate Christmas. In 2015 our annual gathering changed locations to Eden, North Carolina, for a one-time special event. We rented a mountain house and celebrated Christmas in a place that seemed untouched by reality. The house was surrounded by frost-covered trees, seemingly in the middle of nowhere, with no Wi-Fi! There was a rushing river right outside the front door. To me, it seemed like my family's very own winter wonderland!

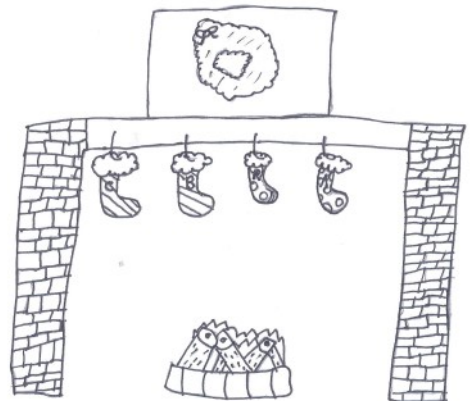
That year, my family's Christmas gathering was a lot different than most. Instead of opening presents around an artificial tree, we traveled 30 minutes to the nearest Christmas tree farm and picked out our very own tree. My cousins and I made ornaments from clay – most were oddly shaped and weird looking. We strung popcorn and cranberries on long lines of string to hang on the limbs.

The mountain house was always filled with the warmth of a fire that my uncle kept going all day and night in the fireplace. More times than not, someone was baking in the kitchen, filling the whole house with wonderful Christmas smells. You could hear our cousins' ongoing ping pong competition from every point in the house.

Christmas that year was different. In the mountains, it was usually too cold to go outside. My family was literally stuck inside with each other for most of the trip, and honestly, it was great fun. That year, we spent a lot of time together – making ornaments, decorating our handpicked tree, playing games and watching football. Christmas is a special time of year, and there is no one I would rather spend it with than my family.

Lord, we pray for our family and friends during this holiday season. We pray for those far and near, and we pray for those without anyone to share this special time with. Help us to hold all people in our hearts as we near the time of your son's birth. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

Maggie Collins, high school senior



Caroline Stephany, Age 8

Tuesday, December 17, 2019



For the needy shall not always be forgotten, and the hope of the poor shall not perish forever.

Psalm 9:18

This year I was called by God to participate in my first mission trip to Bayonnais, Haiti. It was everything I hoped it would be and everything I feared it might be. Haiti is the poorest country in the western hemisphere and has had more than its fair share of natural and political disasters.

Unless you actively seek information about Haiti, you likely have heard little or no news about the rapidly declining conditions of Haiti since the devastating earthquake in 2010 or the Category 5 hurricane Matthew in 2016.

Upon my arrival and over the next seven days, I experienced a range of emotions from pure joy to profound sadness. There is visible hope among the people in basic living conditions, and laughter easily heard from the local school children. There is also a pervasive mood of ever-growing despair as a corrupt government fails to provide even the most basic services (gasoline, clean water, electricity or healthcare) to the majority of its 11 million citizens.

Is their story not worth telling? Has Haiti been forgotten by the rest of the world? At first glance, it would seem so.

As of the day I am writing this story, Haiti has been completely out of gasoline for weeks and most government services are nearing a standstill. No school. No travel. No way to transport much needed aid. Anger is simmering with no relief in sight. Rebellion is in the air and acts of violence are more frequent. Most support agencies (including ours) have been encouraged to leave until it is deemed safe to return. And yet we hear little or nothing outside of our church about what is being done to help the people of Haiti.

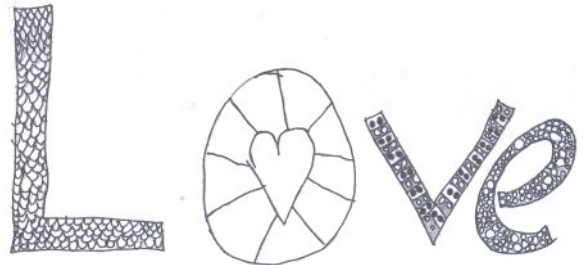
While this news is disturbing, there is still hope. I witnessed it daily as our team interacted with the Haitian people and saw the potential still possible for this remarkable country.

During this holiday season it is my hope that we all take time to pray for the forgotten people of Haiti and seriously consider traveling there as part of the SMPC mission team when it is once again safe.

Maybe soon, the long-standing suffering will end, and we can report the news of a stronger, healthier, safer and more prosperous Haiti.

Lord, help me to hear you saying “I am your hope” over all other voices. I’m running to you with both hands stretched out and grabbing on to you. Fill me up with hope and give me a tangible reminder today that hope is an unbreakable spiritual lifeline. In Jesus’ name. Amen

Todd Gorden



Elise Ullman, Age 9

Wednesday, December 18, 2019

Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth; burst into jubilant song with music. Psalm 98:4

My husband, Bill and I, along with our family William, Malinda and Leanne, moved a great deal up and down the east coast. Yes, I did enjoy this nomadic life for many reasons, but mainly celebrating with new friends and experiencing new traditions.

One such special Christmas was in Bel Air, Maryland, when the girls were home from college and we witnessed the amazing, "Singing Christmas Tree." This performance was not an easy production. Three weeks before Christmas, many strong hands assembled the scaffolding frame and wound the live greenery around the frame so the 100 or so choir members could stand as if they were placed in the tree. Behind the scenes the choir was rehearsing, and tickets were being requested and distributed.

The night of our reservations finally arrived. We had to get there early to get a "good" seat! The sanctuary was filled with excitement. At the appropriate time the lights went out and everything was dark. There was the rustle of feet. All was quiet. Suddenly the spotlights lit up the Christmas tree. The singers were dressed in green and red shawls and took their places inside the tree. These blended voices started singing Christmas songs. For two hours the audience was spellbound. Chill bumps on our arms, the tears flowed freely while we kept time with the music.

Too soon the magical evening was over. The lights dimmed one last time and a spotlight focused on the very top singer as she sang with a clear, strong voice, "Silent Night." While leaving the church in silence, your body was filled with Christmas spirit, love and joy – wonderful memories to be added to your "memory bank."

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for the many traditions, friendships, music and Word of God we have shared. May we take the time to reflect. Amen

Joyce Highsmith



Grace Wooley, Age 8

Thursday, December 19, 2019



For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16

Christmas is special to us all... family all around, decorations, yummy food and treats. I'm from a large family and with five siblings, it was always hectic, but fun. Christmas Eve was the most special. My Mom's only brother flew in from Connecticut to our home in Sullivan, Illinois. We always made appetizers of stuffed mushrooms with Uncle Tom and just hung out all evening until time to go to late service at our Methodist church. My Dad's specialty, French Onion soup, was always on the menu. Another special part was sitting on my Dad's lap and begging until he let us open one gift. He would always give in by choosing the smallest ones under the tree. I lost my Dad last year so Christmas Eve is not the same. In reflection, nothing really is due to the grief. It's hard because nothing stays the same.

This Christmas we all need to be close physically and, if that is not possible, close in spirit and in our love for each other. The good ol' times can never be replaced, but our faith and love for each other can easily be renewed in this special season. Let us be present in the moment together and not worry so much about things but being with each other.

Dear Heavenly Father, please be with each and every one of us this holiday season, some aren't as happy and joyful as others but remembering you and the reason for the season is the true meaning of Christmas. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Susan Hicks



Oliver Bayer, Age 5

Friday, December 20, 2019

For nothing will be impossible with God. Luke 1:37

Growing up in Denver, Colorado, guaranteed that there would be snow on the ground in December setting the stage for a "White Christmas." It also assured you of "Christmas in July," a popular marketing slogan brought to all Mile High consumers by Jake Jabs, owner of American Furniture Warehouse. Jake was famous for shepherding large tigers, cougars and other big cats into his showroom during every television commercial.

Seriously though, a much truer and graceful meaning of "Christmas in July" emerged with the birth of our adopted son, Aaron Charles, in Honolulu, Hawaii. Every child born in Hawaii is given a Hawaiian name and Aaron has a truly beautiful name that resonates with the proper meaning of Christmas.

Kapielaalohapumehana, which means "messenger of love from Heaven," is Aaron's Hawaiian name. With his birth, my wife Amy and I have received a very beloved gift. By far, the most ultimate gift of compassion, trust and unconditional love that provides us with unity as a loving, Christian family.

Many "messengers of love from Heaven" have come and many more will come to share their gifts with all of us. Christmas is all about love and my wife, Amy and I, are blessed to share our faith in Jesus Christ, along with his message of love, with our son Aaron Charles this Christmas and for many more Christmas celebrations to come.

Christmas celebrates the birth of our Lord's son, Jesus Christ. This will be Aaron's first Christmas and we are looking forward to commencing with our family traditions. We will blend honored pastimes from each of our families and create some of our own as we recognize and honor God's love, devotion, power and grace every Christmas... whether that is July, December or any other special month of the year!

The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. Numbers 6: 24-26

Aarik Eberhardt

*Originally appeared in SMPC's 2010
Advent Devotional Guide*



Kate Smith, Age 13

Saturday, December 21, 2019



Every good gift, every perfect gift, comes from above. These gifts come down from the Father, the creator of the heavenly lights, in whose character there is no change at all. James 1:17

One of my fondest memories is when my oldest son was about three years old. We were spending Christmas with my parents and every inch of every room was decorated like something out of *Southern Living*. There was a huge tree with ornaments and sparking lights and masses of beautifully wrapped presents. Each present had a large tag with the recipient's name and as the first grandchild, my son had the majority of the presents.

I happened to go into the room with the tree one evening and noticed that every present with my son's name on it had a little tear in the paper. When I asked him about what had happened, he told me that the cat must have done it (that led to a different conversation about truthfulness), but the point was that the anticipation of all those wonderful presents was too great to resist.

When we think about Advent, it's the anticipation of the greatest gift, one we won't outgrow, doesn't break and never expires!

Lord God, thank you for our greatest gift and help us to remember during this season that your gift redeems us all. Amen

Lilli Gerardi



Elowen Smith, Age 8

The Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 22, 2019



“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” Jeremiah 29:11

The Advent season has always been one of my favorite times of the year. I love the sounds, the smells, and the time that I get to spend with the people that I love the most. I look forward to the traditions of decorating our tree, attending the Christmas Eve service, and seeing the smiles on our children’s faces when they open their gifts on Christmas morning. It’s a slower pace that is so needed and welcome.

It’s also a time that allows me to reflect on the past year. This year has been exceptionally challenging for our family. We have suffered a miscarriage, a difficult and unplanned job change, a move, and the sudden loss of an infant nephew. At times, it all seemed too much to bear. There were many days when I thought that we couldn’t possibly handle one more thing. When those thoughts began to creep in, however, I always heard a little voice saying, “Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place.” This hymn and that phrase have been a constant guide in my life since I was a teen. I have sung those words in times of celebration and in times of pain. They calm my spirit, remind me that God is always with me and that, although the path may not be clear to me, God knows the way.

The new job has been such a blessing, we have met a wonderful new community, and are expecting our third child at the beginning of February. God is good!

Dear God, thank you for the blessing of this life that you have provided. Help us to remember that you are always with us with your steadfast love and guidance. Amen

Sarah Starr



Elise Ullman, Age 9

Monday, December 23, 2019



Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Romans 12:13

It's late in the Christmas holiday season 2001 and I just couldn't find one ounce of Christmas spirit. In previous years I'd focus my energies on creating the perfect holiday which translated into Tartan ribbons and a schedule packed with family, friends and church events. Focusing on Christmas left me so exhausted that the idea of eagerly anticipating what is coming and preparing my heart was a bit overwhelming.

The previous five Christmases had been painful since my divorce. My extended family tried to embrace us with open arms, but Christmas accentuated all the memories of what we were missing. This year I pulled out a tiny ceramic Christmas tree with and lights and told my 16-year-old daughter, Erin, we were going to have a quiet Christmas. It was the best I could do.

On December 23 to my surprise, my daughter suggested that we start a new tradition. After a short discussion, we decided open our house to anyone who did not have any place to go or maybe, like us, were trying to start over. We spread the word via friends. No perfect invitations, just come over Christmas morning for the Christmas story and breakfast.

We thought we might have eight guests. Imagine our surprise when 35 people, some of whom we did not know, filled our house with love, anticipation and waiting.

A miracle happened that morning when one of our guests turned out to be a Catholic priest who had fled from the Congo two months earlier for safety. Pere Louis asked if he could express his gratitude. In broken English he prayed and then sang "Silent Night" in French. His story and his song touched our souls.

To this day, Erin still cites that Christmas as the best one ever.

God of miracles, help us to see with our hearts what our eyes cannot see. Amen

Janet Goetz

*Originally appeared in SMPC's 2007
Advent Devotional Guide*



Ben Stephany, Age 7

Christmas Eve, Tuesday, December 24, 2019

Thus says the Lord, who gives the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar- the Lord of hosts is his name. Jeremiah 31:35

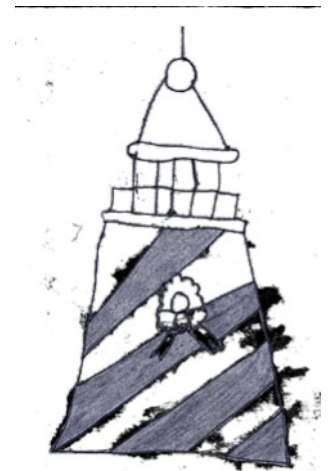
Sanibel Island, Florida, is a magical place - almost sacred to my family. I have been visiting there every year, mostly in the summertime, since 1975. It's a place where my parents, my sisters and their families, all of the Kinsey children, and many friends have gathered over the years to share time together and create memories - mostly fun, happy, relaxing times, many family milestones, and some bittersweet as well.

December 2015 my oldest sister and I concocted a surprise for the whole family to be on Sanibel Island for Christmas. The highlight of the trip was attending a candlelight Christmas Eve worship service on the beach at the lighthouse end of the island. We worshipped with our toes in the sugary sand littered with seashells, beautiful sunset behind us, and the lighthouse in front of us. Hundreds of people gathered to celebrate the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ with music and word as candles were passed around for all to share the light. We have a framed picture of a starfish on the sand in our Charlotte home that says, "Heaven is a little bit closer on the beach by the sea." I know that to be true every time I am able to be on Sanibel Island, and on that special Christmas Eve on the beach we all definitely felt that sentiment. To think that every grain of sand, every tide change, and every drop of ocean water all fall under the sovereignty of our Lord is humbling.

It was an unforgettable Christmas Eve for all. To be surrounded by the beauty of God's creation and celebrate the miracle of Christ's birth with beloved family and strangers alike was truly a gift.

Dear Lord, thank you for the beautiful mystery of creation you have given us and for Your Son Jesus Christ. Help us to be mindful of those gifts and share Your love and light with others every day. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

Blythe Kinsey



Jake Zagora, Age 8

Christmas Day, Wednesday, December 25, 2019



**This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.
Luke 2:12**

The kid loves inchworms! She was fascinated by them. And all during the spring, Elowen would collect inchworms as they descended from the trees lining our neighborhood. After gathering them, she would name them. Then, after a couple of days, she would reluctantly release them back into the wild. The idea of an inchworm family reunion seemed to do the trick.

Then, we received the call. Elowen was to be admitted to Levine Children's Hospital because some recent lab work was out of whack. The numbers were off, and we needed to get her to the hospital – no time to waste. Five days later, Elowen was released. Our five-year-old daughter was diagnosed with Stage 3 Chronic Kidney Disease. Everything we knew changed.

Jen, the girls, and I needed calm. We needed to recharge our spiritual batteries. We went to church the following Sunday after Elowen's release from Levine. All three girls were at Children's Worship. Jen and I were left alone, barely holding it together. Inside, we were a mess. Things with Elowen were uncertain. We had so many questions and we didn't have a clue.

Suddenly, while we were singing a hymn, an inchworm appeared on the page. From seemingly nowhere, in the middle of the hymnal page, sat an inchworm. We couldn't believe it! At that very moment, Jen and I were both overcome with grace, a weird joy, and a bit of solace.

Jen and I held the inchworm until Elowen returned from Children's Worship. She was joyous in our discovery. It was as if Elowen was reminded of what life resembled before her diagnosis. She had found her spark again. Following the service, Elowen released him back into the wild – the church courtyard. She found peace.

His name was Trevor.

Give us the grace to be the change we want to see in the world. Let us love unabashedly. Let us lend a hand wherever needed. Let us shine Your light and help us to recognize Your grace each and every day. Amen

Jen & Kyle Smith



Elowen Smith, Age 8



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