

Journey
to the
Manger



2018 Advent Devotional
Brookwood Baptist Church

Journey
to the
Manger



In a message he preached 15 centuries ago, Augustine offered these words about the Christ-child in the manger:

Our Lord came down from life to suffer death;
the Bread came down, to hunger;
the Way came down, on the way to weariness;
the Fount came down, to thirst.

He so loved us that, for our sake,
He was made man in time,
although through him all times were made.
He was made man, who made man.
He was created of a mother whom he created.
He was carried by hands that he formed.
He cried in the manger in wordless infancy, he the Word,
without whom all human eloquence is mute.

And without Him, we were a hopeless people. Thanks be to God for the Miracle in the Manger!

In the pages that follow, members of the Brookwood Tribe offer a daily word for us as together we journey to the manger. Be blessed from now until Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, when together we gaze and marvel at the Family Nativity!

Dr. Jim Barnette
Senior Pastor
Advent 2018



The First Sunday of Advent *December 2*

Over the last several weeks, I have been re-watching the show "Parenthood" on Netflix. The last time I watched the show, it was being shown one episode per week on NBC. After each cliff-hanging ending, I would be left to wait several days before finding out what happened with Joel and Julia, Adam and Kristina, and the rest of the Braverman clan. As I am watching it now, I can play episode after episode (depending on how much time I have free or how late I want to stay up at night), watching months of the characters' drama in only a few hours. Waiting is no longer a prerequisite for satisfaction.

Our current cultural moment does not often require us to wait. We have online shopping for pretty much anything we want or need with 1-2 day shipping. We have lines at Target that allow us to go ahead and scan and pay for our own items without the hassle of waiting behind other customers. Dial-up has turned digital. We have drive-thrus and ApplePay and call-ahead seating. We have a question...we can Google it and have an answer in seconds. Waiting has become an enormous inconvenience.

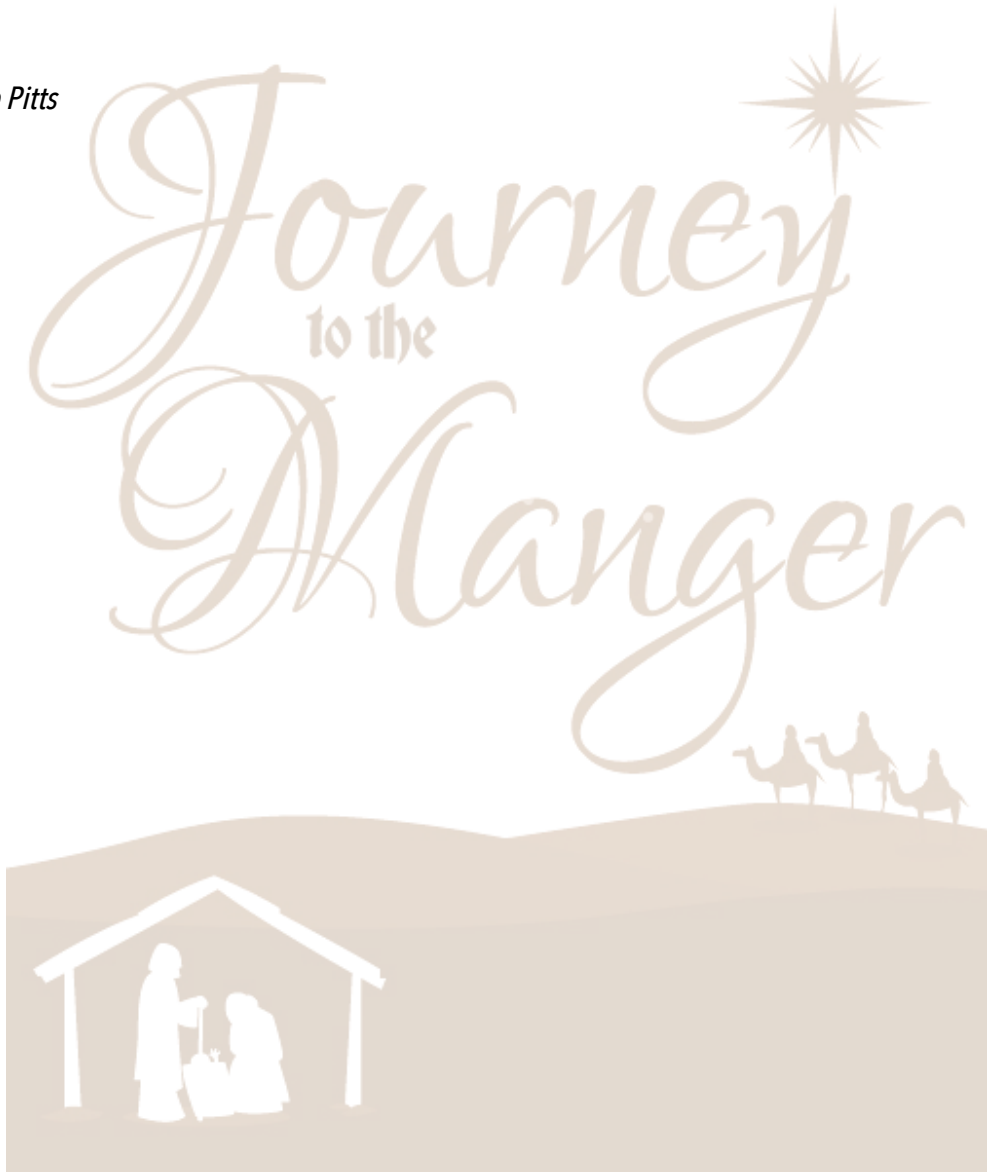
As inconvenient as it might be for us in our digital age to wait, there are some things that can only come through waiting...growth, healing, reconciliation, maturity, answered prayer. Most significant things in life require patience. And waiting. Lots and lots of waiting.

Advent is a beautiful reminder of the spiritual practice of waiting. The children of Israel waited decade after decade for the Messiah to appear. And then they waited some more. Between the age of the prophets and the birth of Jesus, there were generations of Jews who waited for the culmination of the prophecies, for the promised Anointed One who was to come for their salvation. They waited with nothing to hold onto...except hope. And that "hope did not disappoint" (Romans 5:5). Jesus far exceeded any expectation that his ancestors had of his coming. Everything about his birth and his life were extraordinary. He was worth waiting for.

As you approach these days of Advent in expectation of the coming Jesus, how are you experiencing waiting in your life now? Is God doing a work that is requiring patience of you? If so, are you waiting well? Is your faith growing or withering while you wait? The psalmist tells us in Psalm 27:14: "Wait

on the LORD: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the LORD." As He did with the people of Israel over hundreds of years, God the Father will give you courage and will strengthen your heart as you anticipate what He is bringing to fruition in your life. It will be worth the wait.

Renee Pitts



December 3

Journeys – trips we all love to go somewhere special. Months before the trip we begin to get excited about where we are going, who we will see, what we will do, all the things that make a trip special, especially if we are going somewhere to see those we love! Anticipation builds as the day gets closer and closer.

Often times when we think about the journey to the manger we think about Mary and Joseph or maybe the shepherds or even the Wise Men, but have you ever stopped to think about what Heaven must have been like as the days grew closer for the Son's journey to the earth? Were the Angels whispering, "it's almost time, is He really going to go there? Is He really leaving all of this for them? Will the Father let Him go? Why does He want to journey there, they don't know him or love him?" I can only imagine what Heaven was like as the days grew closer and closer for God the Father to send Jesus the Son to earth.

You see this journey was planned in eternity past. The Father knew we would need a Savior and the only way for it to work was that the Son would have to journey from the glories of heaven to earth. The writer of Galatians puts it this way, "But when the right time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, subject to the law. God sent him to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law, so that he could adopt us as his very own children. And because we are his children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts prompting us to call out, 'Abba, Father. Now you are no longer a slave but God's own child. And since you are his child, God has made you his heir.'" (Gal. 4:4-7)

A journey that made you and me children of God – heirs of the most high! No wonder on that night when the announcement was made to the shepherds the angels broke out in song, so many that the air lit up, singing Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth! So this Christmas season as you journey to friends and family and celebrate this wonderful season remember that the journey actually began in heaven before time ever began. The journey to make you and me children of God was conceived in the heart of a Father who so loved us that He sent forth His Son and that the Son gladly accepted this earthly destination. Have a blessed Christmas! Journey in Joy!

Yvonne Looney

December 4

The Greatest Verse and The Greatest Gift

As part of Brookwood's annual Thanksgatherings held in member homes, a Thanksgathering led by Diane Waud, Keith McLeod and True Vine's Pastor Ralph Garth was held on a crisp Sunday afternoon - November 18, 2018 - in the True Vine Women's Home. Also present were the ladies residing in the home, several True Vine staff and about a dozen of us from Brookwood.

The home is a former parsonage on the True Vine Church campus. This summer Brookwood members repaired the home and furnished it predominantly with donated items. It now houses a resident housemother and ladies recovering primarily from drug or alcohol abuse. We have shared many prayers and hugs with these individual ladies as they tackle their challenges as disciples of Christ.

That Sunday the home was also dedicated as Pastor Garth prayed that the home be protected by God's angels. The dedication included a gift of a house Bible given on behalf of Brookwood by Bette Nesbitt, who was involved in refurbishing the home. She gave a devotion which is paraphrased and offered as an Advent devotion for today.....and for everyday.

Bette began by asking us, "What is the Greatest Verse in the Bible?" In unrehearsed unison, we responded, "John 3:16!" She acknowledged we were correct. We then recited it all together.

"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 NIV

Bette then explained why it was the Greatest Verse as follows:

- "God" - The Greatest / Our Creator
- "So loved" - The Greatest Devotion
- "The world" - The Greatest Number
- "He gave" - The Greatest Act
- "His one and only Son" - The Greatest Gift

- "That whoever believes" - The Greatest Condition
- "Shall not perish" - The Greatest Mercy
- "Have eternal life" - The Greatest Result

This verse is also voiced every Sunday by the Brookwood Ladies Faith Sunday School Class as a closing prayer.

This verse has a special, added dimension in our lives this year as Richard and I joined the ranks of Brookwood grandparents with the birth of our grandson six months ago. While we are looking so forward to seeing images of Christmas tree lights this season in his bright eyes, we also realize more than ever, with his arrival, the importance for us to lift up the legacy of Christ each and every day within our family, with our brethren and to others "Above and Beyond."

Gail Stevens



December 5

Advent is a time to recognize the value of patience and reflecting on our life as a Christian. In the Old Testament of the Bible, many waited for the Messiah to come just as in the New Testament the wise men, Mary, and Joseph waited for baby Jesus. Now, in our Christian life, we are waiting for the return of Jesus too. We look forward to the day He will take us to heaven so we can live with Him. Advent reminds me of what is worth the wait.

We often wait in our lives today for great things, but for things that do not always last. For example, I, like most kids, wait for Christmas to get my presents and toys. To me, Christmas is always exciting because of the presents and the stockings. For Christmas sometimes we get toys that don't last long because we want a new toy and the other you just don't use anymore.

Now here's one I think lots of people are waiting to arrive, summer. I think summer is so popular because there is no school. Maybe you have to still do some school work like my dad makes me, but probably not as much as you would do in school. One of the reasons I love summer so much is the trips we take. One summer, our family went to the beach and one of my favorite parts was swimming in the ocean. Even though I got stung by jelly fish twice. Summer is short, however, and soon we had to go back to school.

I remember having to wait for my cat, Lucy. I had to work around the house and at my grandparents for a year to make enough money to buy her at the Humane Society. While waiting, I was allowed to meet other cats, I could see all the puppies, and play with the grown dogs too. When we finally went to purchase Lucy, the place was covered with dog fur, and the dog crates and cat room all smelled like fishy cat treats.

Finally, Lucy was allowed to leave and to come home with me. I was so happy to know I would have a really good friend in my life. But if Lucy has been a good friend, I know God will be an even better one.

Waiting is hard. Being patient for the things we want in life, like Christmas, toys, summer vacation, and pets can try us. The joy and excitement of new things never seems to last. The Bible teaches us in 1 Peter 1:8-9, "Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you

believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls." So, at Advent time, I think about the joy I have in Jesus. At Advent, I am reminded that as a Christian, I am waiting on something that will last.

Olivia Roberts



December 6

The Ten Word Christmas Narrative

The gospel accounts of Matthew and Luke provide awe-inspiring Christmas narratives. If I had to select one verse, though, upon which to meditate during the Christmas season, it may well be the 14th verse of the first chapter of John's gospel. While John makes no mention in his gospel of the shepherds or the wise men or the manger or the star in the east, he manages in a single verse to give us an incredibly rich perspective of Advent.

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us..."

There it is. In ten words, John captures two key elements of the Christmas story - - the mystery of the supernatural, and the proven reality of God's love for us. In an act of cosmic humility and radical love, the Divine miraculously takes on flesh and takes up residence with us.

One of John's contemporaries, the apostle Paul, emphasized that this heavenly gift to humanity was not without sacrifice on Christ's part. For while Christ was "in the very nature God," he "made himself nothing taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness." (Phil. 2: 5-7)

Jesus chose to be made in human likeness and to make his dwelling among us. Does this not mean that he desired to experience the life we live - - to grow with family, to develop friendships, to engage in community, to work, to play? Are we not to assume that Jesus knew full well that in entering such a life, he would encounter severe brokenness? He would witness diseased bodies, fractured relationships and immoral behavior. Yet, still he came and still he made such a place his home.

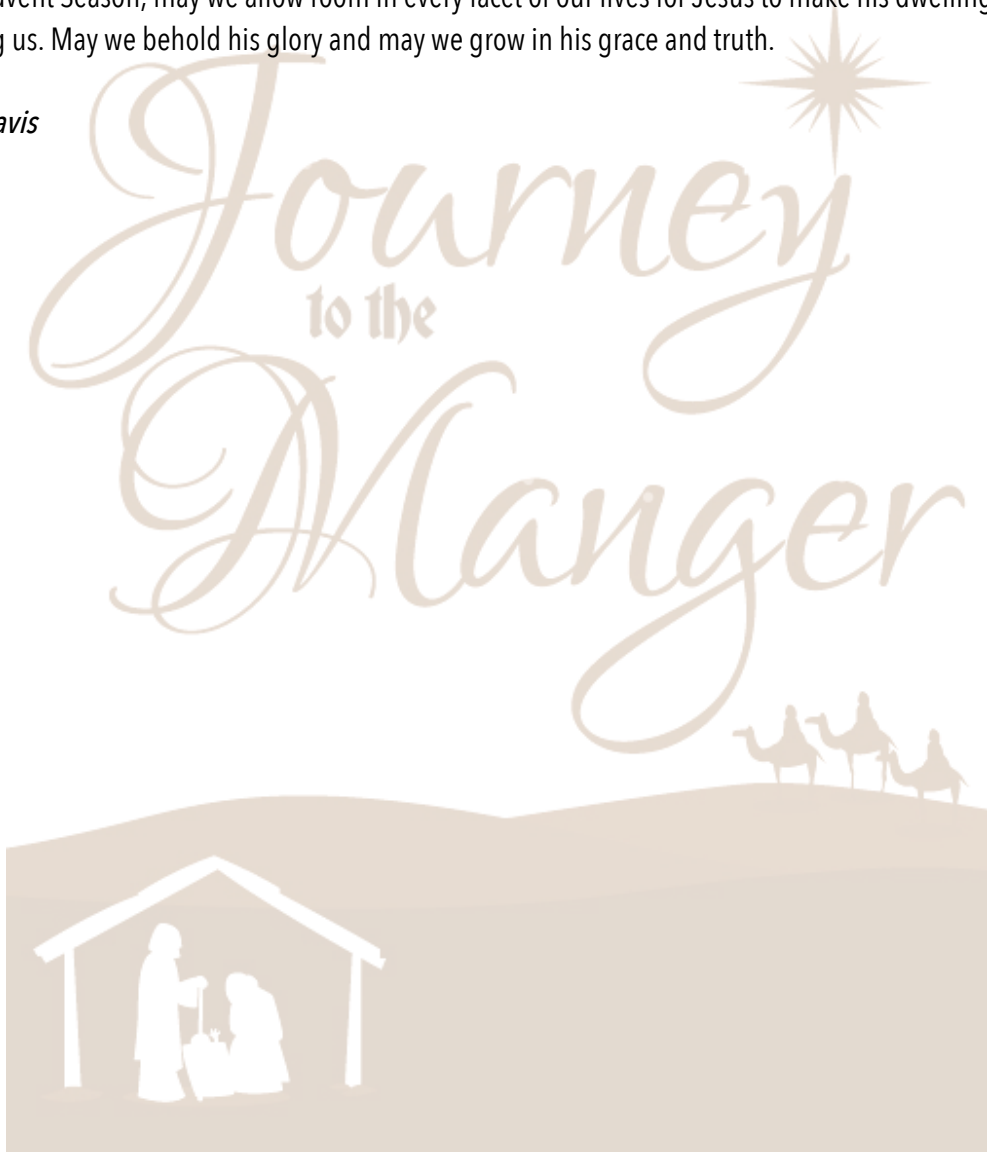
Does this not point to a love beyond all comprehension? Does it not mean that Jesus longs for our friendship? Can we not trust that even in our brokenness, in our worst moments, Jesus continues to pursue us, to seek to heal us, to guide us into his abundant life?

The 14th verse of John's gospel does not end with the ten word Christmas narrative. John goes on to testify to the life that was born that Christmas morning and which he later personally observed. John

states "we have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

This Advent Season, may we allow room in every facet of our lives for Jesus to make his dwelling among us. May we behold his glory and may we grow in his grace and truth.

Tim Davis

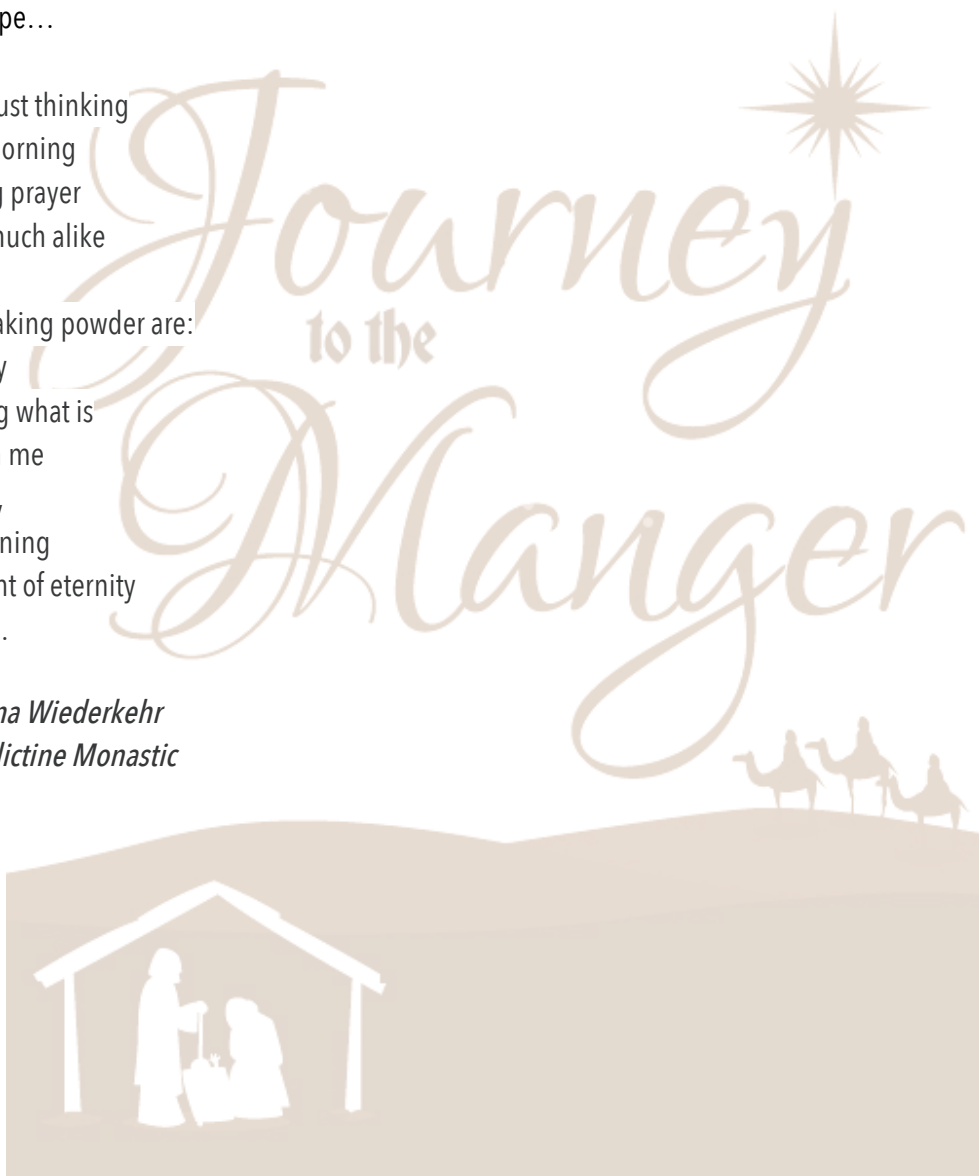


December 7

On Hope...

I was just thinking
One morning
During prayer
How much alike
Hope
And baking powder are:
Quietly
Getting what is
Best in me
To rise,
Awakening
The hint of eternity
Within.

Macrina Wiederkehr
Benedictine Monastic



December 8

The Nativity

Among the oxen (like an ox I'm slow)
I see a glory in the stable grow
Which, with the ox's dullness might at length
Give me an ox's strength.

Among the asses (stubborn I as they)
I see my Savior where I looked for hay;
So may my beast like folly learn at least
The patience of a beast.

Among the sheep (I like a sheep have strayed)
I watch the manger where my Lord is laid;
Oh that my baa-ing nature would win thence
Some woolly innocence!

C.S. Lewis

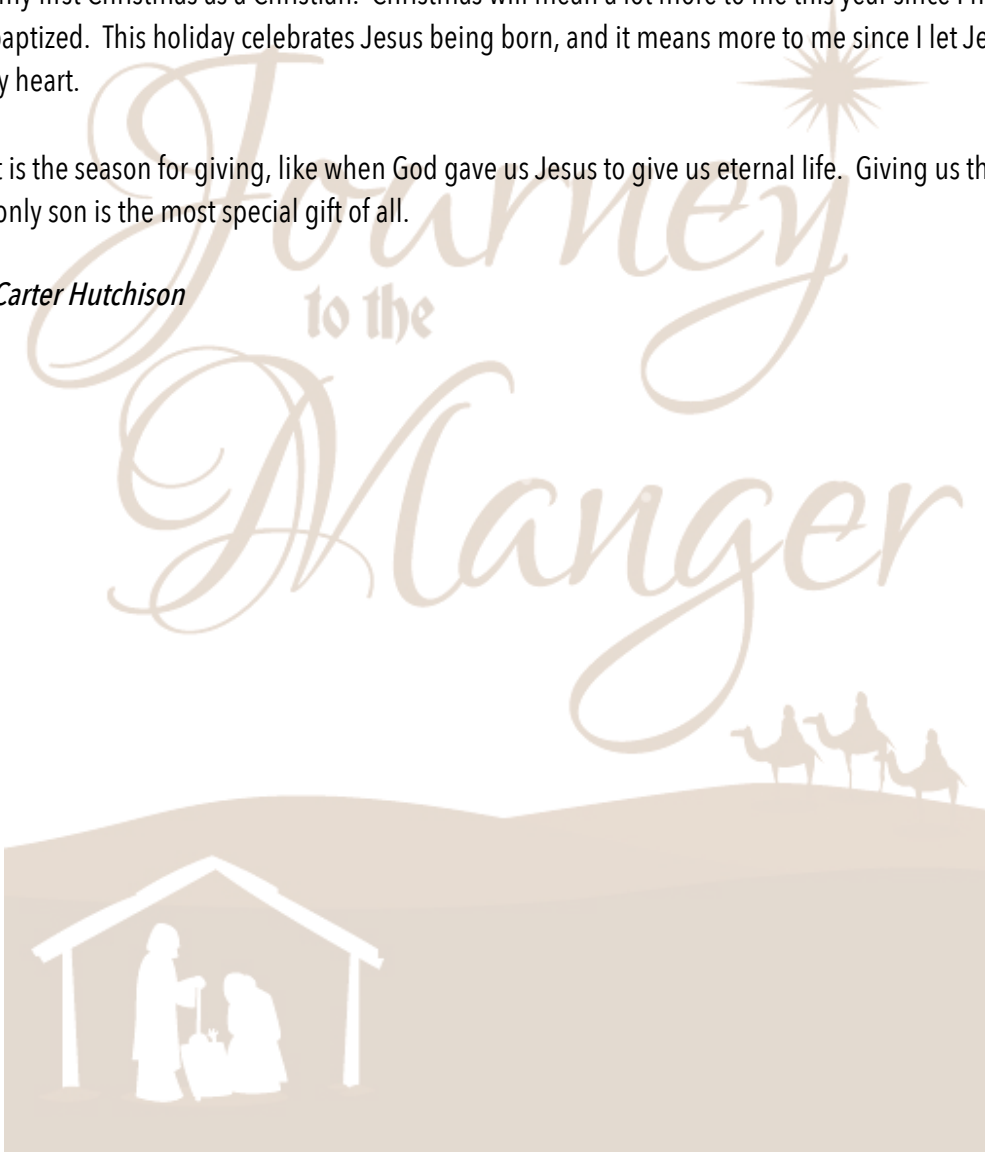


***The Second Sunday of Advent
December 9***

This is my first Christmas as a Christian. Christmas will mean a lot more to me this year since I have been baptized. This holiday celebrates Jesus being born, and it means more to me since I let Jesus into my heart.

Advent is the season for giving, like when God gave us Jesus to give us eternal life. Giving us the gift of His only son is the most special gift of all.

Anne Carter Hutchison



December 10

Messy Hallelujah

A few months ago my mom taught me about the significance of the Hallelujah Chorus. Growing up going to the contemporary service, about all I knew was that we sang it during the Advent season. Mom taught me that the congregation is supposed to stand when it is played. I never knew anything different than to stand while singing it, but I also had never really thought of why. While doing some research I found that when King George II heard it in 1743 he stood and it became tradition from then on. When Handel completed Hallelujah he told one of his servants, "I did think I did see all Heaven before me, and the great God Himself on His throne, with His company of Angels," so I think King George had the right idea. Then I got to thinking about Jesus' birth... did Mary stand after having Him in a dirty manger? Did Joseph stand after walking miles on end so that his pregnant wife could get what little rest she could on the journey to Bethlehem? If I had to guess, it would be a no. The way I imagine it, they fell to their knees beaten and bruised, yet completely in awe of the miracle that was baby Jesus. I have a feeling they were singing some pretty messy yet beautiful hallelujahs with the angels.

Thinking about Mary and Joseph reminds me of this past year in our church and families. We have seen multiple members of our church battle breast cancer, yet we have gotten to sing hallelujah along the way with improved and eventually clean scans. That's a fall on your knees, messy hallelujah. We have seen Simeon Sandkuhl go through the very long process of getting his US citizenship, so he can go back and keep serving the Lord in Guatemala alongside Casey and their boys. That is a messy hallelujah. I have had the privilege of finding out my brother and sister-in-law were pregnant and a few weeks later finding out that my sister and brother-in-law were FINALLY pregnant after years of infertility. Y'all better believe I was on my knees with tears streaming singing hallelujah. But I have also had to hold a patient's mother as she leaves Children's Hospital without her son. Now that was a hallelujah hard to sing, hard to accept God's sovereignty, hard to truly believe Heaven was better than this broken world. My hallelujahs have been many, but they have come in all different messy, broken, and beautiful forms.

What are your messy hallelujahs?

When I think back to the times in my short 22 years of life when I am most in awe of God's grace and mercy, it is not when it has been smooth sailing. It is after coming out of the deepest of valleys, and often times it is when I am still in them. When Jesus reaches down into the depths of my heart and hardships, just like he did on that not so silent night in Bethlehem, and holds me in his arms when I am too weak, and also when I am too in awe to stand.

I encourage you this Advent season to stand, kneel, fall on your face, raise your hands, whatever you feel is right to you to fully honor the sacrifice Jesus made to make himself known to us as He clothed Himself in humility in the form of a baby. And know that it is ok to sing those messy hallelujahs, because I know that when you do, you will be singing with the angels, no matter what stance you are in.

Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah,
Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah

Annie Hamm



December 11

He would have been 98 on December 3. Instead of gathering to celebrate Daddy's birthday, my brothers, sister, other family and long time friends celebrated his life a few weeks ago at our mother's childhood church in North Carolina where he had served both as pastor and interim for several years.

Daddy loved to sing as part of his daily worship and, that day, we all worshipped by singing some of his favorite hymns: **Holy, Holy, Holy; Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow; Nearer My God to Thee;** and **Just as I Am**. The church's full choir sang **The Journey**, an arrangement by Joseph M. Martin, which blends the old Shaker song **Simple Gifts** with the hymn **Going Home**:

Tis the gift to be simple, tis the gift to be free,
tis the gift to come down where we ought to be and
when we find ourselves in the place just right,
it will be in the valley of love and delight.

Going home, going home
I am going home....
Jesus is the Door
Work all done, laid aside....
Morning Star lights the way....
Real life has begun.

Beautiful truths of how God used the life work of this ordinary man for His extraordinary purpose filled the words of all who spoke in his memory.

Daddy was only 15 when he began preaching on a street corner in Greenville, South Carolina and sharing the hope of Christ with anyone who felt defeated and disappointed in life. He was 94 when he preached his last sermon encouraging any who listened to experience freedom by proclaiming Jesus Christ as Master and Lord of Life and to find true purpose in Him who makes us acceptable in the presence of a Holy God.

I've spent a lot of time since Daddy's memorial service thinking about gifts and journeys. During this Advent season, when we sing **Thou Didst Leave Thy Throne** I will celebrate, in a new way, the indescribable gift of God's grace to all who believe in the Master and Lord of Life.

Thou didst leave Thy throne and Thy kingly crown
when Thou camest to earth for me;
but in Bethlehem's home was there found no room
for Thy holy nativity.

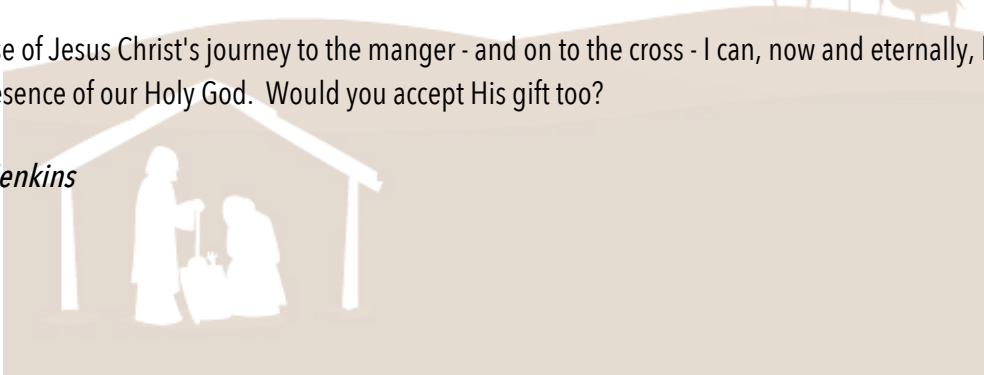
Thou camest, O Lord, with the living word
that should set Thy people free;
but with mocking scorn, and with crown of thorn,
they bore Thee to Calvary.

When the heavens shall ring, and the angels sing,
at Thy coming to victory,
let Thy voice call me home, saying
"Yet there is room, there is room at My side for thee".

O come to my heart Lord Jesus,
There is room in my heart for Thee.

Because of Jesus Christ's journey to the manger - and on to the cross - I can, now and eternally, live in the presence of our Holy God. Would you accept His gift too?

Jane Jenkins



December 12

I don't remember ever going without when I was a child. My family was large and loving and I was as secure and content in the embrace of those relationships as anyone can ever hope. My cup overflowed.

And, too, I never wanted for anything. I thought we were rich, and we were in all that mattered...I believed it even though I didn't have the words to express it.

Talk about a parent's love...

Growing up, it was a given that for Christmas and Easter, we children would be outfitted, head to toe, in new Sunday clothes. It was a big deal to travel downtown, all dressed up, to the big department stores and select the most beautiful dress, shoes, socks, purse, hat, and yes, little white gloves, the family budget would allow! There was nothing casual about this shopping excursion; it was serious business.

I don't remember the same "procession" for my dad getting a new suit or my mother a new Sunday dress; just we kids decked out to the nines. It's funny the things we remember. One of my very vivid memories is of a shopping trip my mother made for herself. She set off one day one day alone and came back with three new dresses...one of them I remember so clearly I could, should I have adequate artistic ability, draw a perfect rendition of it. I remember feeling so excited when she modeled them for us. No one was more beautiful, inside and out, than my mother. Even young little me was so glad she had done this for herself. And though she didn't need a new dress to make her more than she already was, I remember thinking she glowed.

This memory has stuck with me for my whole life. I think I understand it better as an adult, and definitely as a parent. We would do anything for our children. We put them first...their needs, their desires, their well-being. Most parents are selfless when it comes to their children, sacrificial even.

And I know this is true not just from the example of my own parents, but because I have the same

feeling of indulgent love from God, who gives and gives and gives whether I give back or not. God's love is extravagant, immeasurable. Deserved or not, I am grateful for it and try never to let it become an expectation or "my just reward." I think this is one of those memories that teach a life lesson or blind us in their clarity

And so I begin the season of Advent thankful for what exists in this very moment. I'm grateful for the sacrifices made for me, for the love of God so elegantly taught me by my parents. I'm grateful that God still dresses me up to perfection and whose love has no yard stick; God whose own Son leads me from darkness into divine light...the indescribable gift that keeps on giving.

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in your faith,
so that in the power of the Holy Spirit you may be rich in home.*

Romans 15:13

Rosanna Tsivourakis



December 13

Listening to the sounds of the season

Music adds so much to all of the special times during the year, but probably never more than during the time leading up to Christmas Day. Music can be a universal language that leads people to our Savior, especially during the advent season. Like the star that pointed the wise men to where Jesus was resting, music can take us to that same exact manger; and what is more beautiful than a song that proclaims our Savior's birth!

I memorized the story of Jesus' birth in the second chapter of Luke when I was in first grade. There is a part in the story (Luke 2:8-18) where an angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds to announce the Savior's birth,

"For unto you is born this day in the City of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

...and then, the beautiful sound of the heavenly host of angels singing the birth announcement of Christ to the shepherds,

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, goodwill toward men!"

I hope music leads you to the manger this season, and I hope it helps us all celebrate God's amazing gift to each of us, his son, Jesus.

Brock Miskelley



December 14

EVERYTHING is transformed at Christmas time. Houses are decorated, lights are strung everywhere, the radio is filled with Christmas music, the oven with Christmas cookies, and there is so much more joy and kindness. A person can always tell when it is Christmas time. I think this is very appropriate because when Jesus was born on Christmas day, he completely transformed everything. He came into the world for the sole purpose of dying in order to save us sinners. Jesus' sacrifice made it so that we can have a personal relationship with God and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. That Spirit, once invited into a believer's life, produces fruit that makes that person different from non-believers. So just like a person can look around and tell when it is Christmas time, a person should be able to look at us and see the fruit of the Spirit and know that we are followers of Christ and have a relationship with God.

"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life." - 1 Timothy 1:15-16

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control." - Galatians 5:22

Caroline Causey



December 15

Jesus our brother, kind and good
Was humbly born in a stable rude
And the friendly beasts around Him stood,
Jesus our brother, kind and good.

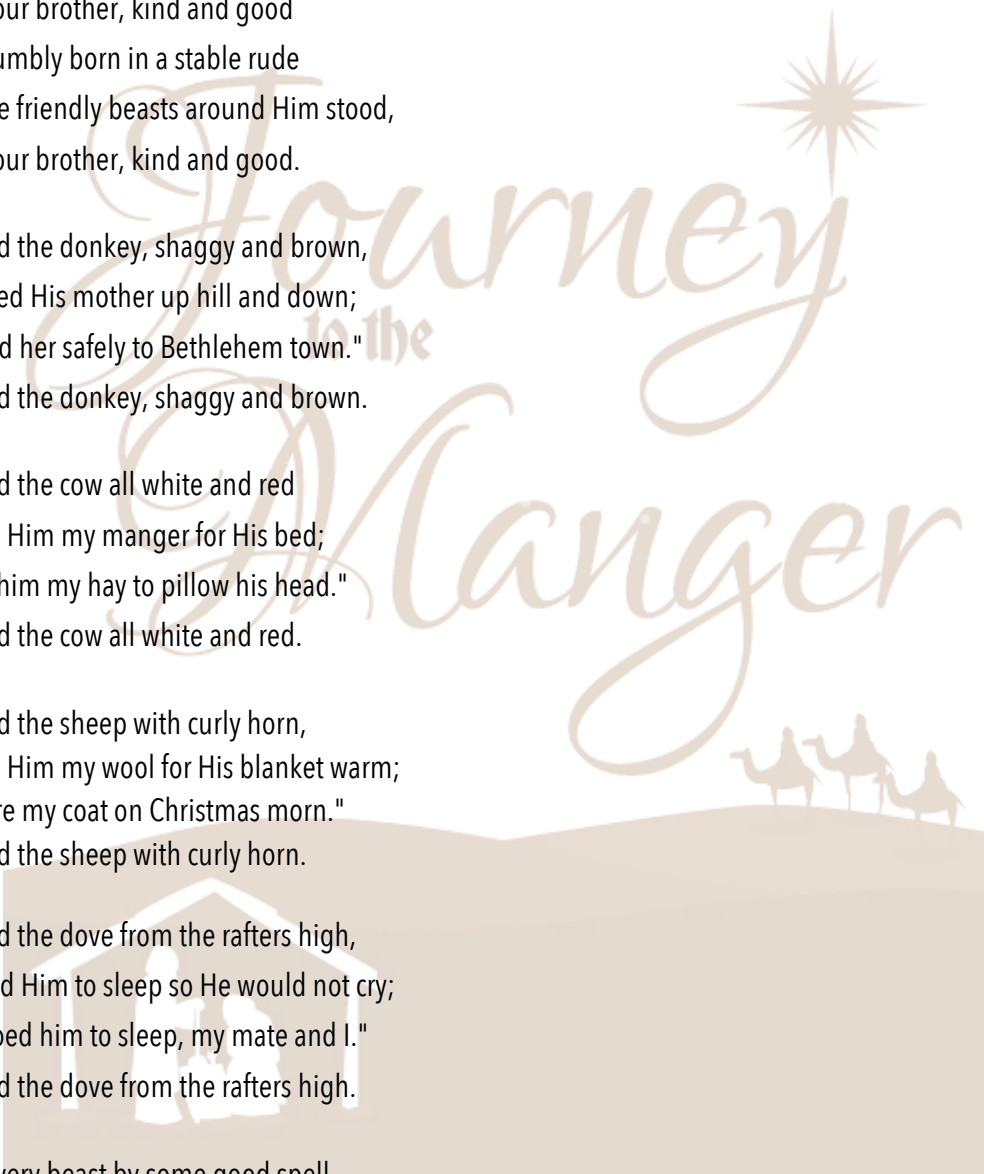
"I," said the donkey, shaggy and brown,
"I carried His mother up hill and down;
I carried her safely to Bethlehem town."
"I," said the donkey, shaggy and brown.

"I," said the cow all white and red
"I gave Him my manger for His bed;
I gave him my hay to pillow his head."
"I," said the cow all white and red.

"I," said the sheep with curly horn,
"I gave Him my wool for His blanket warm;
He wore my coat on Christmas morn."
"I," said the sheep with curly horn.

"I," said the dove from the rafters high,
"I cooed Him to sleep so He would not cry;
We cooed him to sleep, my mate and I."
"I," said the dove from the rafters high.

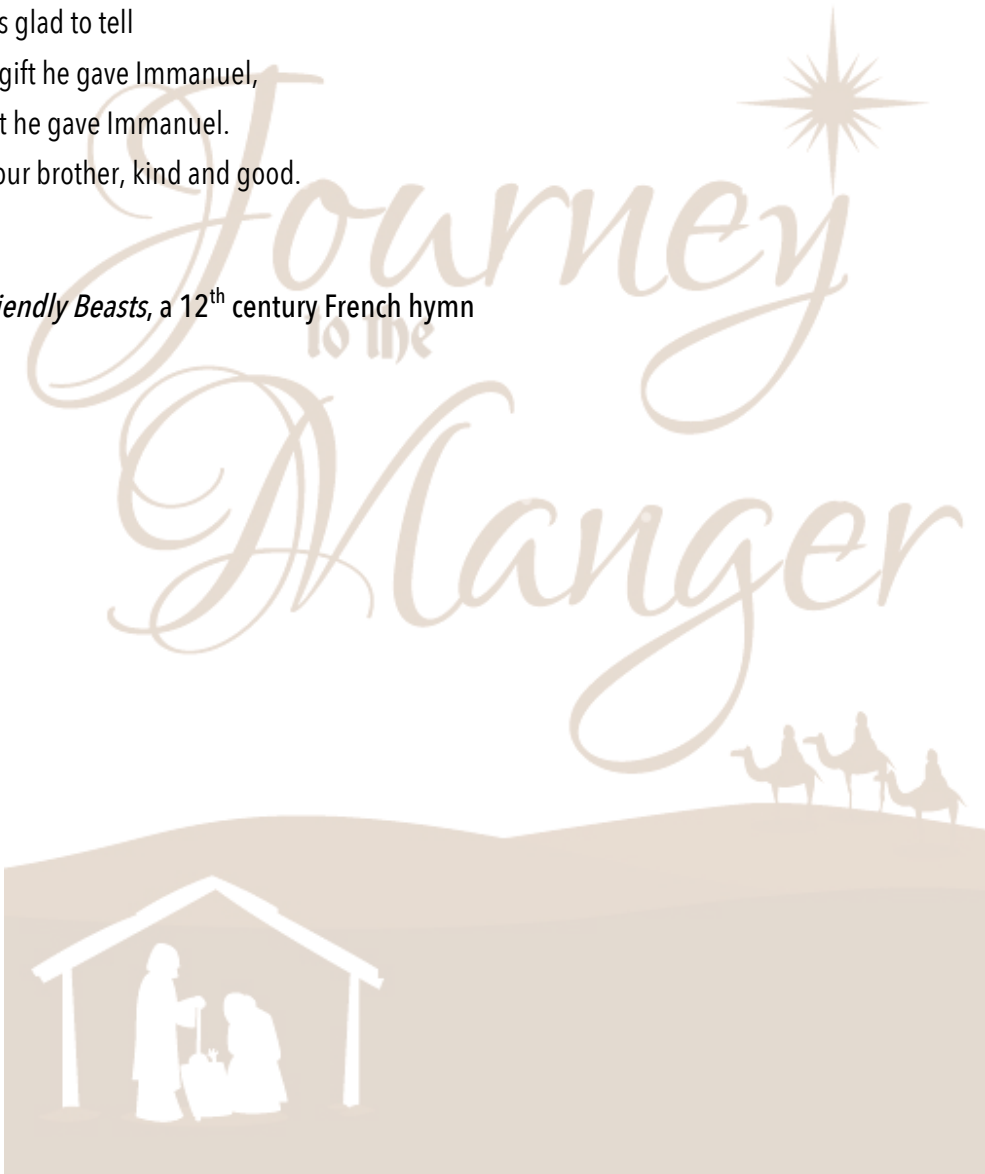
Thus every beast by some good spell,
In the stable dark was glad to tell



Of the gift he gave Immanuel,
The gift he gave Immanuel.

"I," was glad to tell
Of the gift he gave Immanuel,
The gift he gave Immanuel.
Jesus our brother, kind and good.

The Friendly Beasts, a 12th century French hymn



The Third Sunday of Advent December 16

Faith

Somewhere in life you have that moment when you start to get really curious, and doubt sneaks in. BAM! You're saying things like, *"What if Jesus isn't real? What if I die and do not go to heaven?? What if there is no heaven???"* If you haven't had these thoughts, you are lucky! Most of us have had some sort of thought like this. But then we get super busy and those thoughts go away. You feel fine because of how busy you are. But the second you stop, slow down, or hit the brakes, whack! straight in the face, and you are lost questioning again. You feel alone.

I have had all of these thoughts, and in the stillness the whispers from the Holy Spirit have allowed me to remember we are NEVER alone. Psalms 119:105 says, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path." I use this verse every time I feel alone. God already has a plan for me and will always be with me. God's word, the Bible, is my lamp. We cannot walk the path without the lamp. The lamp is the one thing that we can etch into our hearts and minds and NO one can take it from us. Even if the light dims, or needs to be re-lit, the lamp never leaves. The lamp is there always; we have to just not forget to light the candle.

Every day, wake up and light your lamp. Read it, pray over your day and ignite the light. Let it SHINE super bright so everyone will see and feel the lamp.

Merry Christmas & Love!

Gabby Camargo



December 17

It may sound strange but my battle with cancer or my cancer journey and the journey to the manger have some things in common. Please don't get me wrong, ***nothing can compare to the glory and significance of the story of Jesus' birth.*** His story is righteous and divine where mine is so flawed and ordinary. But, I think we can all benefit from some comparisons between his story and our own. It may reveal our shortcomings but it can also shine light onto our path. My cancer journey, I confess, also has some similarities with the story of the Grinch and thankfully the Who's that shined so much light into that dark time.

Like Mary and Joseph, I didn't choose the journey. And, like Mary and Joseph, the road ahead was difficult. I admire how Mary accepted God's plan for her and yielded, saying, "May your word to me be fulfilled." I didn't want cancer to be the road for me and I didn't want to yield. Cancer broke me and broke my heart. But like the Grinch, my heart and my faith were a bit small and I had some growing to do. Also like the Grinch, the Who's in my life showed me a kindness, tenderness, and goodness that I had never experienced before. God is faithful, even when we are not. His glorious riches are more abundant than this Grinch could have ever imagined.

Like a Grinch, I am ashamed to admit that for a long time I felt like I had to face life's challenges on my own. Those feelings weighed me down and darkened my perspective. Instead of living with hope and faith, I dwelled on my troubles, cares, and annoyances. Can't you just picture the Grinch alone on the mountain brooding? There is a reason the Bible directs us to fix our thoughts on what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable. Meditating on good things transforms the way you think and that changes the way you live. The deep darkness of cancer forced the light bulb to switch on and caused me to challenge my way of thinking. It's amazing how darkness makes you turn to the light.

In my grinchiness, I had been trying to be strong on my own, but I knew I wasn't strong enough to beat cancer. Finding my way to health meant finding a way to stay hopeful, have courage, and live in faith, and, by God's grace, I knew found the Way.

As I turned to God's word for direction, I was reminded to be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power, to put on the armor of God and to know in my heart (have the courage to believe) that I was not alone. And, as my journey went along and the Who's sent so many encouraging texts, cards, and

flowers, and fed us, and lifted us in prayer and the many, many other ways they carried us along, I knew I was not alone. God's love surrounded me and I saw His ability to work good in all things, even the worst things. I saw God's word come to life and my faith grew.

I can't imagine how hard it was for Mary traveling while expecting a baby, and the burden of delivering her baby far from home. I also can't describe how painful it was going through all the doctors' appointments, treatments, and the looming test results during chemo. But, on the journey, I was surrounded by believers walking with me heart to heart, hand in hand, shining His light into the brokenness. I wonder how Mary's heart must have swelled when she met her baby boy after her long journey. Oh, how my heart grew and how I felt the joy of God's love and faithfulness all the more deeply through my difficult journey.

One of my very favorite parts of the nativity story and the journey to the manger is Luke 2:19-20:

*But Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart.
The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things
they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.*

Please reflect on those words. Sometimes the road is long, the journey is difficult, but what if that allows our faith and heart to grow and make room for the treasures God has planned for us? What if the difficulties are the training we need to throw off everything that hinders and run the race set before us? And sure the journey gives us the chance to learn how to raise our shield of faith and value faith like never before. And like the shepherds, the journey gives us the chance to share the good news with others and glorify and praise God along the way. We get the chance to see that God's word is just as He said. God is faithful to his word and His Word saves us.

Would I choose cancer again? Truly, I cannot say yes, but that highlights God's sovereignty. His light shined through the places broken by cancer and revealed His power, his love, and His faithfulness. I hope God's light will shine on your journey to Christ, and I hope that you will receive each day he gives as a **GIFT!** For **God Is Faithful Throughout.**

Jennifer Holley

December 18

Ponder this, if you will:

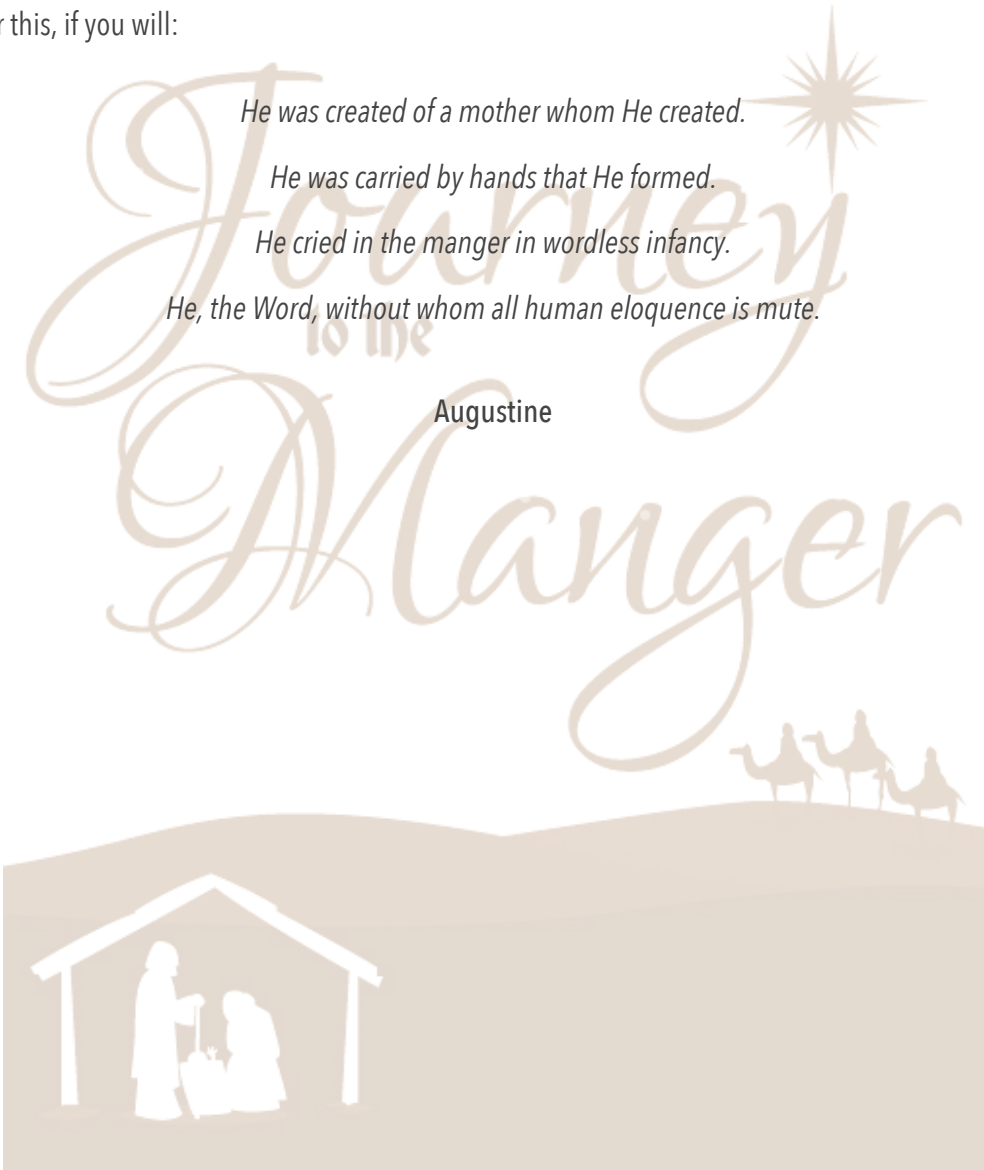
He was created of a mother whom He created.

He was carried by hands that He formed.

He cried in the manger in wordless infancy.

He, the Word, without whom all human eloquence is mute.

Augustine



December 19

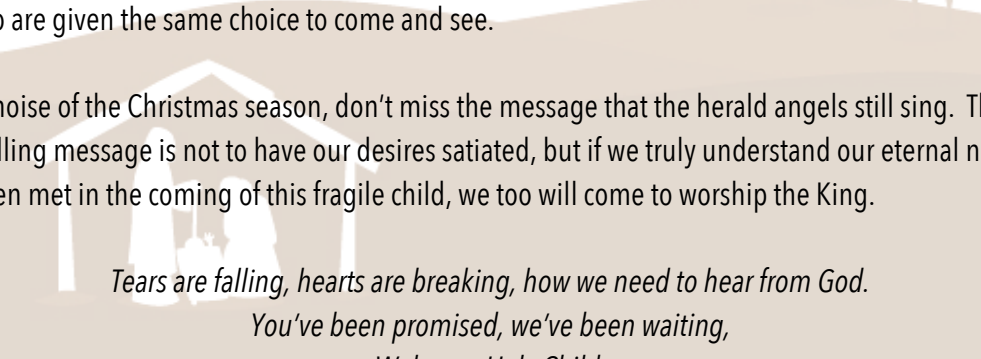
Welcome to Our World

Which gift is more special - to receive what is a need or to fill a desire? In this world of comfort and instant gratification, we have convinced ourselves that desire is equal to a need. Desires can never be fully quenched but when a need is met, it satisfies to the core.

In the last 2000 years, man has indeed made many advancements, but our basic needs remain unchanged. In our perceived sense of sophistication, danger abounds when we make ourselves comfortable and create a false sense of security. Because we can say -'hey Google' - are we really any smarter? If we rely on GPS, do we really know where we are going? Have we truly evolved? We are unfortunately reminded that in our advanced world, we still have a seemingly endless capacity for hate, violence, neglect, depravity, and addiction. A self satisfying, self reliant generation has little need of a savior.

On that first Christmas night, eternity was fractured to break the bonds of sin. The Creator, the Word, the I Am - allowed what is infinite to take on the finite form of the creation. The shepherds on that silent night nor the wise men coming from afar, were any more or less in need of a savior than we find ourselves today. Both wise and the lowly found what they sought because they did not miss the signs pointing to the Savior. We walk the shepherd's sod and gaze at the same stars that shone that night and too are given the same choice to come and see.

In the noise of the Christmas season, don't miss the message that the herald angels still sing. The compelling message is not to have our desires satiated, but if we truly understand our eternal need has been met in the coming of this fragile child, we too will come to worship the King.



*Tears are falling, hearts are breaking, how we need to hear from God.
You've been promised, we've been waiting,
Welcome Holy Child.*

*Hope that You don't mind our manger, How I wish we could have known,
but long-awaited Holy Stranger, make yourself at home,
please make Yourself at home.*

*Bring Your peace into our violence, bid our hungry souls be filled,
Word now breaking Heaven's silence,
Welcome to our world.*

*Fragile finger sent to heal us, tender brow prepared for thorn,
tiny heart whose blood will save us,
Unto us is born.*

*So wrap our injured flesh around You, breathe our air and walk or sod.
Rob our sins and make us holy, perfect Son of God.
Welcome to our world.*

Chris Rice

Tim Davis



December 20

While I sit down to write this and to think about the journey to the manger, our church and our collective walk through the advent season, news breaks of tragedy in Squirrel Hill, a community just outside of Pittsburgh.

In the following days, community leaders and residents shared stories of loss and darkness, but also of love and the bonds which tie us together. One interviewer asked a rabbi in a neighboring community why he thought events of hatred happen. Audibly choked up over national radio, he responded not with blame or resentment, but with this, "Because we need to show more light."

Ultimately, it is the light of Christ, shining through each of us as a conduit, which breaks such darkness.

Verses speaking to the theme of darkness are plentiful. As Christians we learn that:

- the light overcomes it (John 1:5) and is frankly just better than it (Ecc 2:13)
- we are called out of it (1 Peter 2:9)
- by following Christ, we never have to walk in it (John 8:12)
- we actively strive so our bodies are not filled with it (Luke 11:34-35)

Think of the darkness which must have been a constant threat on the journey to the manger, accompanied by cold, uncertainty, and a whole host of other hurdles. Yet because of faith and light, that journey was completed.

Today as we march on toward the manger, knowing darkness is generally lurking close by, pull out your light and let it shine. That is how darkness is expelled and the journey completed.

And I will lead the blind in a way that they do not know, in paths that they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground. These are the things I do, and I do not forsake them."

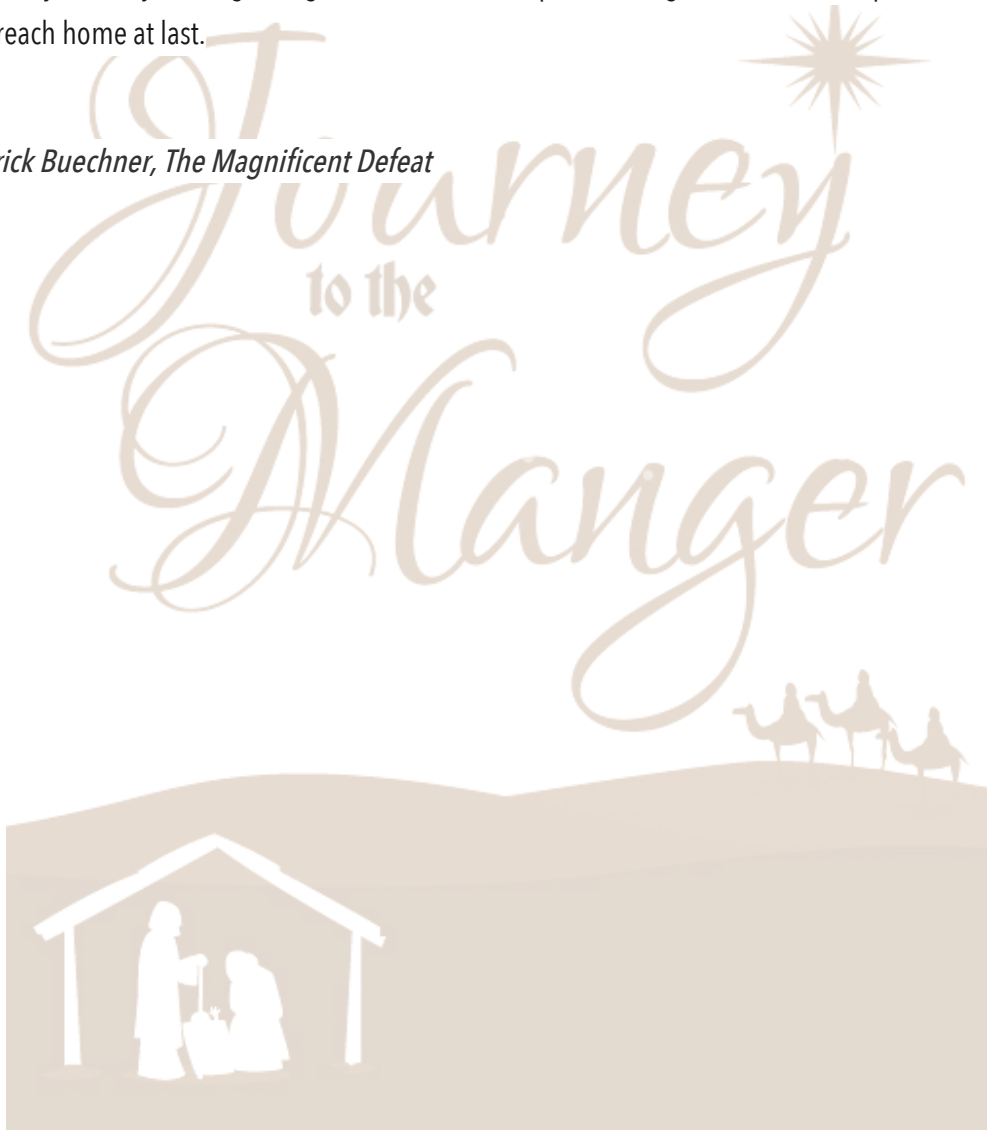
- Isaiah 42:16

Katelyn Page

December 21

Outlandish creatures like us, on our way to a heart, a brain, and courage, Bethlehem is not the end of our journey but only the beginning - not home but the place through which we must pass if ever we are to reach home at last.

Frederick Buechner, The Magnificent Defeat



December 22

After Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, regains his ability to speak, he begins to praise. In chapter 1 of Luke, Zechariah "filled with the Holy Spirit" praises God in a passage we refer to as "The Benedictus." He praises God for salvation through God's son, who has yet to be born, through a means that has yet to be revealed. More specifically, in vs. 69, Zechariah proclaims, "He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David."

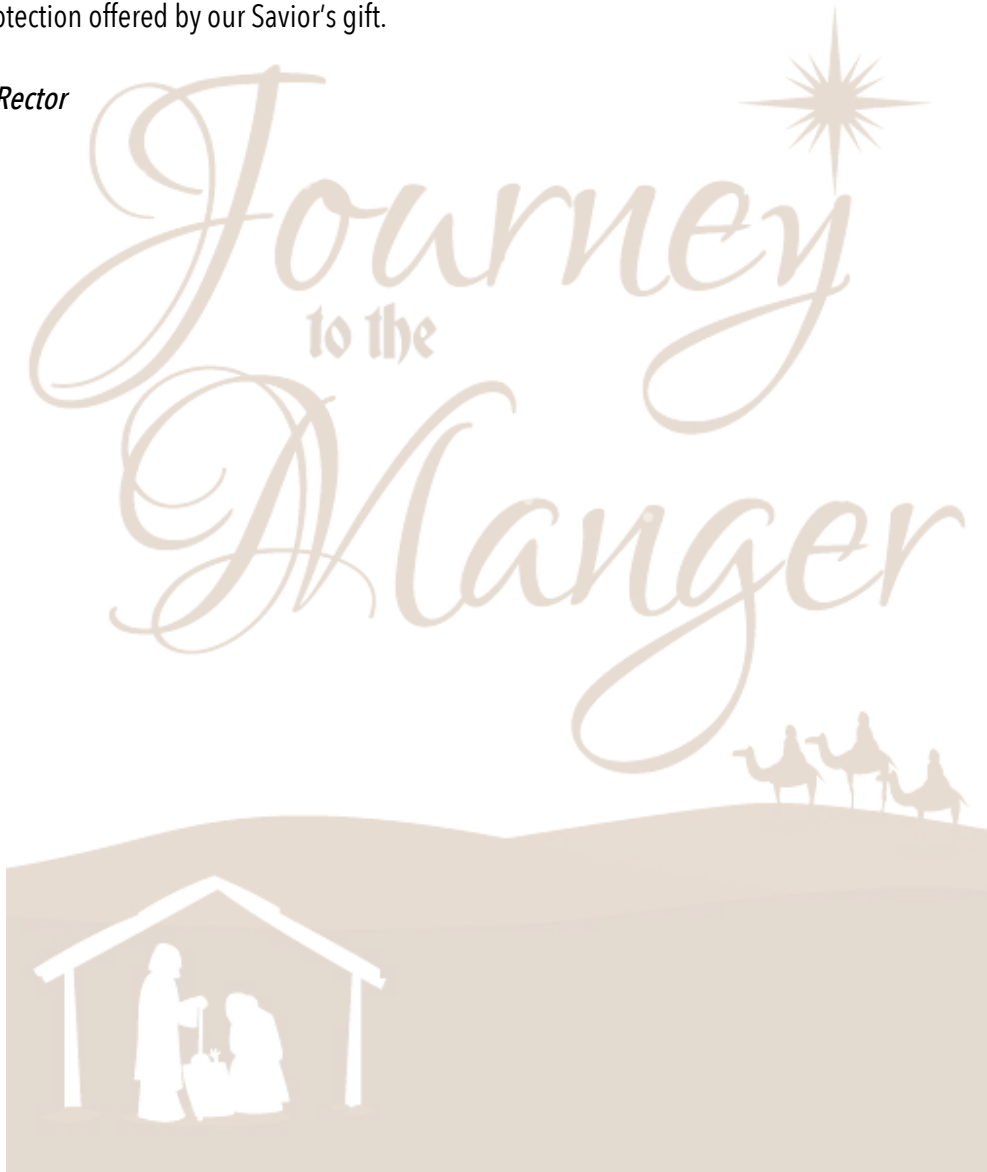
I have always been struck by this imagery of a horn. Having grown up in Birmingham, I have not spent much time around any horned creatures, but in my less than exhaustive research on horns I learned some interesting information. The first is the distinction between horns and antlers. Antlers are branched and shed annually. Unfortunately Santa's reindeer don't really help us understand the Biblical imagery here. Horns, however, are unbranched and permanent. Furthermore, horns continue to grow throughout the animal's lifespan. Horns are permanent, which might make sense of why the Spirit would lead Zechariah to compare salvation to a horn. God's gift of salvation in Christ Jesus, once received, becomes etched into our beings. As believers, we are called to continue to grow in faith in the light of our salvation.

Like a horn, salvation emboldens the one who possesses it. Horned animals often use their horns to fight, defend, and show strength. A horn of salvation or as Paul writes in Ephesians, a helmet of salvation, both describe salvation as the tool that empowers the most fragile and sensitive part of our bodies, the head. With the mere presence of a horn, the head is transformed into a position of strength.

A common horned animal in Southeast Asia and one likely familiar to people in Jesus' day is the Arabian oryx. The oryx has two horns between two and three feet long. When threatened by an enemy, the oryx's first resort is to stand sideways with its herd, showing both unity and displaying its massive horns from a more intimidating angle. I think we, as believers, would do well to be reminded that our salvation not only should unite us with fellow believers, but it is *more than enough* to equip us against Satan.

Though no one in the Brookwood tribe is a horned animal, I encourage us to think about what this gift of salvation means for each of our lives. With our horns raised, we have an eternal gift of salvation that should empower us each and every day to fight in the spiritual battles of this world, fully confident in the protection offered by our Savior's gift.

Anne Rector



The Fourth Sunday of Advent *December 23*

Christmas and Suffering

I wish I could tell you that all of my Christmases growing up were akin to a Hallmark movie – you know, a perfect family in their perfectly decorated home with their perfectly wrapped gifts experiencing the perfect Christmas and reveling in the reason for the season. But, I can't. You see, I have an older brother (10 years older) who is an alcoholic. The years when I was growing up, he was a young adult, and Christmas was always a hard time for him. It was generally in everyone's mind in my family that something bad would happen at Christmas to my brother. Whatever happened to him affected our entire family.

My family's suffering did not mean that every Christmas was bad. One of my favorite memories of my mother and Christmas involves her genuine excitement to be a Secret Santa. My mother was our church secretary. She never did anything halfway – Secret Santa included. My mother would spend a lot of time shopping for several perfect gifts for the person whose name she had selected. While all of the gifts would be small, they were each meaningful. Of course, all the gifts would be wrapped creatively with precision (she was Type A). As a teenager, I was involved in the delivery of the gifts. It was fun, and there is no surprise that, today, I love participating in Secret Santa just as my mother did.

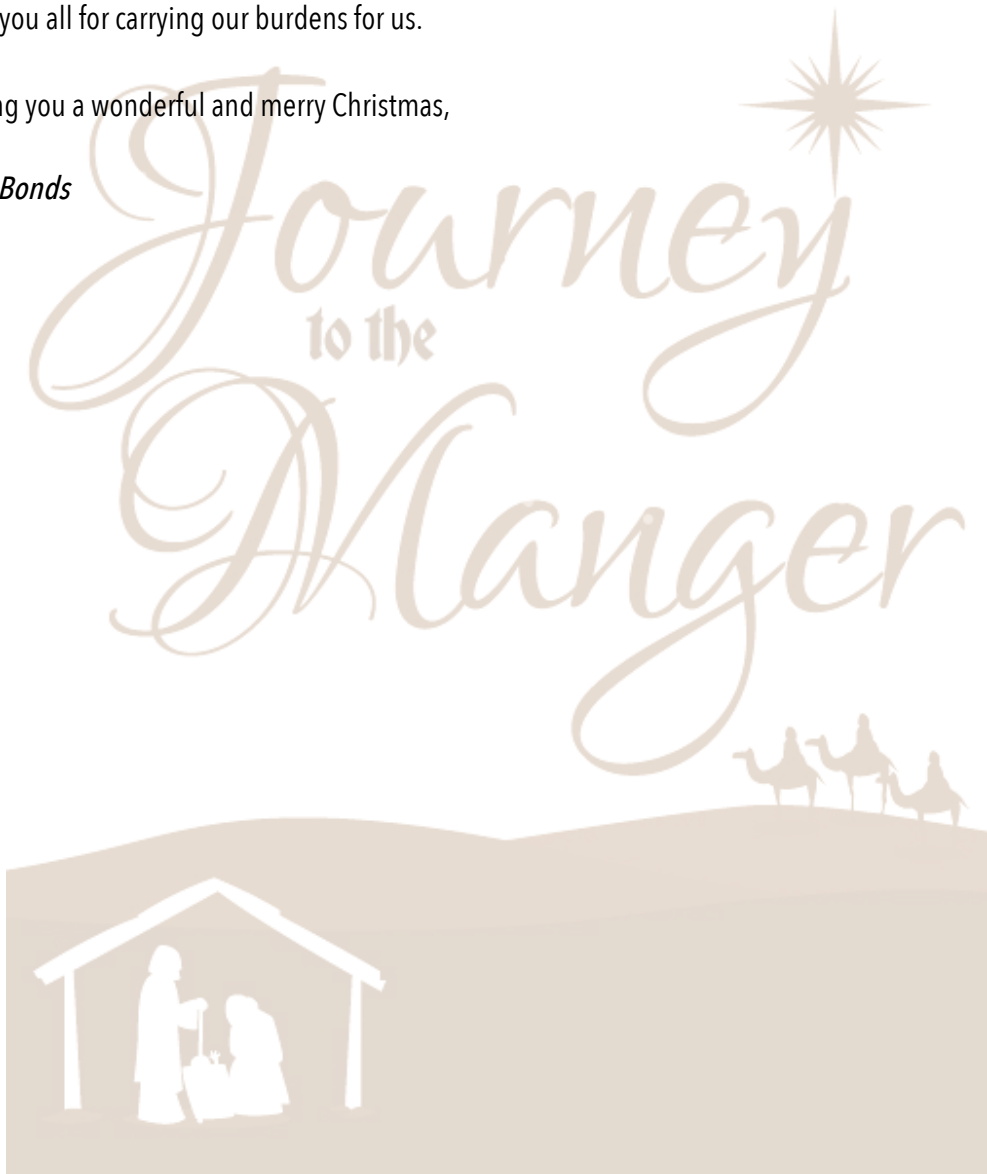
Even now, while we are in the midst of suffering with ALS, I have personally experienced our church's ability to live out Galatians 6:2 which reads: "Carry one another's burdens; in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." So many people in our tribe have done just that for me and for Bryan – they have stepped up and carried our burdens. Of course, physical suffering is not unique to our family, and this tribe has and will continue to carry the burdens of others in our church who suffer physical ailments. However, some of our tribe's suffering is not as exposed as physical suffering is. So, my hope for this season is that we will be intentional in seeking out those whose troubles may be locked behind closed doors – like my family's was while I was growing up. I hope we can be intentional with small gestures to invite them to ride with us to church or sit by them during one of the Advent events. Believe it or not, sending a heartfelt note in the mail can do wonders for those suffering (I never realized the power of personal notes until we received them). Probably more importantly, I hope we will all be open to

allowing others to talk about their suffering, without judgment and without trying to fix it. The simple act of allowing someone to air their suffering will oftentimes remind that person of better times.

Thank you all for carrying our burdens for us.

Wishing you a wonderful and merry Christmas,

Emily Bonds



Christmas Eve *December 24*

Excerpt from *The Valley of Vision* Puritan prayers:

O God, take me in spirit to the watchful shepherds,
and enlarge my mind;
let me hear good tidings of great joy,
and hearing, believe, rejoice, praise, adore,
my conscience bathed in an ocean of repose,
my eyes uplifted to a reconciled Father;
place me with ox, ass, camel, goat,
to look with them upon my Redeemer's face,
and in him account myself delivered from sin;
let me with Simeon clasp the new-born child to my heart,
embrace him with undying faith,
exulting that he is mine and I am his.
In him thou hast given me so much that heaven can give no more.

I love this prayer! In it, we are invited to enter in to the story of the first Christmas. We've heard sermons inviting us to place ourselves in the story, through the eyes of Mary or Joseph, the angels, shepherds, or wise men. Once, I even heard a sermon from the perspective of the livestock in the nativity scene!

But there is a particular tenderness in the line: "let me with Simeon clasp the new-born child to my heart." It seems a bit scandalous because it invites us to imagine intimacy with Jesus as a baby. We all love to hold babies, don't we? There is nothing in all the world like a new-born baby. Only recently departed from the total dependence of the womb, they are slowly awakening to the reality of an entirely external world. There is no going back into the womb, as Nicodemus reminds us in John 3. So the best we can do is hold them to our hearts, and babies love to be held almost as much as we love holding them. In the beginning, it is where they find their mother's sustenance. I can think of nothing more tender and vulnerable. And so it seems almost like a violation of Christ's holiness and majesty to pray that we might hold him near our hearts like Simeon did. More often, we find

ourselves in need of being held close by Christ. But this intimate image beckons us to remember the Christmas reversal of logic. Jesus became weak and adorned flesh; now he knows us like no other god. Eugene Peterson, who recently himself entered into the arms of Jesus, phrased John 1:14 like this: "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes..." May we see the glory of the new-born Christ in Christmas, the King of Kings emptying himself to the humble, vulnerable place of a baby. And so with Simeon, we proclaim: "Sovereign Lord...I have seen your salvation, which you have prepared for all people" (Luke 2:29-30 NLT).

Blake Dempsey
Executive Pastor



Christmas December 25

If you look back at the first page of this Advent devotional book, you see that we began our journey to the manger with words from a message preached by Augustine. With those words, the great church father tried to capture the mystery of the Incarnation. I would like to close our journey together with another offering from Augustine. This time, he considers the Miracle in the Manger in the form of a poem. Read and hear his words from 15 centuries ago as he looks with wonder upon the Christ-child:

Maker of the sun,
He is made under the sun.
In the Father he remains,
From his mother he goes forth.
Creator of heaven and earth,
He was born on earth under heaven.
Unspeakably wise,
He is wisely speechless.
Filling the world,
He lies in a manger.
Ruler of the stars,
He nurses at his mother's bosom.
He is both great in the nature of God,
and small in the form of a servant.

That God the Son stepped out of eternity and into our world as the Servant of us all is a mightiest of mysteries—eclipsed only by the gift He offered us later at Calvary and at the empty tomb.

What wondrous love is this???

Merry Christmas!!!

Jim Barnette

Journey
to the
Manger

