

# Advent 2011

Light in the Darkness

“Light of  
the world  
You  
stepped  
down into  
darkness,  
opened  
my eyes  
let me see.

Beauty that  
made  
this heart  
adore  
You,  
Hope of a  
life  
spent  
with You.”

Tim Hughes

Advent Devotional Booklet  
Calhoun First Presbyterian Church  
Calhoun, Georgia  
A.D. 2011

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# Advent Devotional 2011

Sunday, November 27, 2011

Hebrews 11:8-12

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"STAR OF HOPE"

Advent marks the beginning of the Christian year. It means "coming" and points to the coming of the Messiah, as foretold by the prophets. During Advent, we are given the time to anticipate the celebration of Jesus' birth – time for preparing our hearts to rejoice in His coming - and time for welcoming Christ into our lives. Advent is a time of preparation. It is a time for repentance and confession. It is always a time for silence, reflection, prayer, and spiritual renewal.

For a number of years, this Advent Devotional Guide has been a source of strength and inspiration to many who have been able to read it and share in its lessons. The success of this special project has been due largely to the efforts and dedication of many of my friends, colleagues and family members. I am grateful for the fact that so many others have shared in my commitment to making this Advent Devotional Guide a reality.

One of the themes we reflect on during the season of Advent is Jesus as the Light of the world. What does it mean when we think of Jesus being the Light? How do you and I experience darkness in this world? What tremendous hope and assurance exists in knowing that God has shown His love for us by sending Jesus into the midst of our darkness to illumine our lives? It seems fitting that we take the time this Advent to consider some of these questions as we proceed through this holy season. This year's devotional is composed of a number of newly written devotions together with other devotions chosen from previous editions.

As always, it is my intention that these devotions will aid in our celebration of the season and in our preparation for the coming of the Christ Child. May you and I be blessed as we consider together what the Christmas and Advent stories, as well as our own personal experiences, have to teach us about the richness and the meaning behind this twenty-some day journey leading up to the celebration of Christmas. - Rev. Pete Ullmann

**Hebrews 11: 8-12 "By faith, Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going.**

**By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old- and Sarah herself was barren- because he considered Him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one good as dead, descendants were born, "as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore."**

Starlight is difficult to come by if you're an urban dweller. The ambient glow from street lights, homes cloistered near one another, headlights from cars, and mall parking lots get in the way of seeing the heavens clearly even on a clear, cold winter's night. You are lucky to spot the big dipper, or view Orion's belt. Nevertheless, I keep looking upward to the stars. I can remember nights of camping where there was no light from anywhere but the moon, when the whole Milky Way opened magically to reveal the incredible vastness of God's creation. And to think that perhaps we are only one galaxy among million's more. Such mystery and majesty defies any human understanding. Even for those who do not believe in higher powers we cannot explain the when, how, much less the why, of such a reality. Our sight does not deceive us, but leaves most people in awe of what exists. For the theologically attuned we try making sense of such a creation as the work of an all-powerful God who created it out of love, or maybe just because God wanted things to be that way. Maybe God simply wanted to impress His human creation from the start with how vast is the here and now, not to mention the beyond. After all, God created the heavens and the earth before we were brought into being as humans.

I remember as a boy visiting my grandparent's farm - going out late at night into the fields and lying on my back trying like the ancients to see patterns in the stars. I was more like Charlie Brown in the old cartoon looking at the clouds and seeing "horsies" and "duckies" not Beethoven composing his Sixth Symphony, or Freud's couch with a client resting on it. I'm still no good at picking out the constellations, but that really doesn't matter. What I do see is the beauty in starlight and the memory it evokes of shepherds and wise men who followed a particular star. Some to a manger stall and others to a small house in a safer land. I don't mind nativity scenes, winged angels and all, with each of the visitors combined who sought out Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. The cows and sheep add a nice touch. I pause to wonder though, how we are called out of our busy lives to search the night sky for a star we will follow to an unknown destination.

Oliver Goldsmith once wrote:

Hope, like the gleaming taper's light  
Adorns and cheers our way;  
And still, as darker grows the night,  
Exists a brighter way.

In a world tragically in need of hope where hearts are broken every minute and lives are cast into the hell of despair, maybe the star we need most is a star of hope. So I am going to retreat to the back deck of my home during Advent and seek out a "wishing star" - a star of hope. With a little luck and God's help maybe I will find one. I hope you find one, too.

**Prayer: O God of the hopeless and all who seek hope but cannot find it, send us a star and give us eyes to look up and see your presence in the darkness of our lives. Grant us the grace to look around at ground level in the clarity of day to see the stars that twinkle in the eyes of those who care enough to show us your love. Amen**

Rev. Phil Leftwich, Honorably Retired  
Presbytery of Middle Tennessee  
Brentwood, Tennessee  
Advent, 2011

Monday, November 28, 2011

Galatians 3:26- 4:7

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**GOD'S GIFT OF ROYALTY**

**Galatians 4: 7 "So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God."**

Who has not grown up hearing the children's story of "Sleeping Beauty"? When the royal princess is born, the wicked witch curses the new child. The witch's goal is to kill the child before she becomes full grown. However, the good witches conspire to protect the child. They give up their witchcraft and move deep into the woods with the child. The child is raised not as a royal princess, but instead as a humble peasant, far from the plush surroundings of life within the royal court. She grows up thinking that she is a peasant. She lives like a peasant, not as a princess!

Could it be that we Christians make the same mistake. Do we not often forget the royal heritage that is ours through Jesus Christ. Do we not often choose to live as "spiritual peasants" instead of a life of "spiritual royalty." We must remember that Jesus is the Son of God and is right now sitting in Heaven at God's right hand. Is Jesus not part of the greatest of royal courts! So if you remember the teachings of the Apostle Paul who writes "we are all sons (and daughters) of God through faith in Jesus Christ." Then, we should also realize, as a son or a daughter of God we are a heir of the Kingdom of God through Jesus Christ.

What a wonderful blessing! If only we could or would just take ownership of God's gift of royal heritage. This gift includes many blessings, including not only everlasting life in heaven, but also everything we need to live "fulfilled" lives here today. We sometimes may question this blessing, especially when God may choose to give us a new pair of shoes instead of a new red sports car. But truly God promises to provide everything we need today to live lives as God's children here on earth. So we must accept God's Gift and live life not as a peasant but as a royal heir to God's Kingdom both here on earth and in God's Kingdom to come.

**Prayer: Oh Royal King! Greatest of all! Provider of all! Giver of the greatest gift we humans will ever receive! Help us**

**today and everyday to remember you will provide all we need to live fulfilled lives here on earth. Give us the strength to trust in you, instead of trying to rely on ourselves. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

Mr. Charlie Watkins, Elder  
Riverside Presbyterian Church  
Jacksonville, Florida  
Advent, 2005

**Tuesday, November 29, 2011**

**Matthew 1: 18- 25**

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**"O COME, O COME, EMMANUEL"**

**Matthew 1: 23 "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and His name shall be called Emmanuel (which means 'God with us.')**"

I remember learning that some Christmas carols have (many) more verses than what typically appear in our hymnals. The Advent hymn, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" has always been a favorite of mine, so I went looking to see if I could find additional verses. On the website, [songsandhymns.org](http://songsandhymns.org), I found the following:

The season of Advent is often a whirl of buying gifts, decorating the tree and a non-stop succession of programs and parties. It was, however, not that way for the Monks of the Middle Ages. In the monastery, Advent was a time of meditation on serious subjects: death, judgment, heaven and hell. And the month in which we think of Christ's first coming was used by monks to reflect on His second coming. In the same way, this should be true for Christians today....

Our hymn has its origin in seven prose Latin sentences which were sung during medieval monastic vespers leading up to Christmas. Its usage dates all the way back to the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Each stanza (originally, the stanzas were short sentences) salutes

the returning Messiah by one of the many titles ascribed to Him in Scripture.

The ancient hymn writer refers to Jesus as "Emmanuel" and "God with us." He implores Jesus to come and end our separation from God. "Israel", used three times in the stanzas and each time in the refrain, signifies the waiting Church... Jesus is also referred to as the "Dayspring" (or the "Rising Sun"—see Luke 1:78) and is asked to remove the gloom of spiritual night and the shadows of death.

Whether writing in the 9<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> century, these words still address the yearning of Christians everywhere for Christ's return. Another name for Jesus is the "Rod of Jesse" (see Isaiah 11:1). It is a term found in the King James Version of the Bible.... It harkens back to the time when a rod, the club used by shepherds to fight wild animals, played a significant role in defending the sheep.

This hymn is one of the oldest to be found in any Christian hymnal. The following are the verses I found in my searching and they reflect the various ways God has interacted with God's people:

Oh, come, oh, come, Emmanuel,/ And ransom captive Israel,  
That mourns in lonely exile here/ Until the Son of God appears.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel/ Shall come to you, O Israel!

Oh, come, our Wisdom from on high/ who ordered all things  
mightily; to us the path of knowledge show/and teach us in her  
ways to go. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel/Shall come to you, O  
Israel!

Oh, come, oh, come, O Lord of might/ who to your tribes on  
Sinai's height; in ancient times gave holy law/In cloud and majesty  
and awe. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel/Shall come to you, O  
Israel!

Oh, come O Rod of Jesse's stem/From ev'ry foe deliver them  
That trust your mighty pow'r to save; bring them in vict'ry through  
the grave. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel/Shall come to you, O  
Israel!

Oh, come, O Key of David, come,/And open wide our heav'nly home; make safe the way that leads on high,/And close the path to misery. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel/ Shall come to you, O Israel!

Oh, come, Thou Root of Jesse's tree,/An ensign of thy people be, Before Thee rulers silent fall,/All peoples on Thy mercy call. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel/ Shall come to you, O Israel!

Oh, come, O Dayspring from on high, and cheer us by your drawing nigh, disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death's dark shadows put to flight. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel/ Shall come to you, O Israel!

Oh, come, Desire of nations, bind/In one the hearts of all mankind; Oh, bid our sad divisions cease,/And be yourself our King of Peace. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel/ Shall come to you, O Israel!

**Prayer: Come, Lord Jesus. Open our hearts to your presence. Fill our lives with the knowledge and understanding we need to be your people. Enrich us with the joy that your coming brings. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.**

Rev. Sid Venable, Pastor  
Mt. Hebron Presbyterian Church  
Ellicott City, Maryland  
Advent, 2011

**Wednesday, November 30, 2011**

**Matthew 18: 21- 22**

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**"FORGIVENESS"**

**Matthew 18: 21-22 "Then Peter came and said to Him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'"**

A few years ago my wife and I took a young man into our home who had spent the most of his life living in an institution. He had a very rare disability that made him very large. He was over 6'3" tall

and weighed over 300 lbs. But the disability also made him very aggressive and he became angry very easily. He had been placed in the institution when he was 7 after he had attempted to kill several members of his family on separate occasions and had killed or attempted to kill several animals. He had been in 18 different homes in the past two years prior to coming to our home and was facing assault charges for almost killing a caretaker at a previous home. He had been back in the institution for six months because no one else would take him. He lived with us for the next three years and during that time we lived with his constant threats, cursing, sexual language and damage to our property. But over time the breakage and threats decreased and we were never injured ourselves. The young man though, after his episodes of anger, was always insistent on going and asking forgiveness from anyone he had hurt, threatened or offended in any way and could not rest until he had done so and until he felt that he had obtained forgiveness.

As we worked with him we learned that many of the things that made him angry were that he had lots of pain related to his disability. Over time he learned things that he could do to make the pain go away. He also learned that we cared for him. Gradually, instead of breaking things when he began to hurt, he would ask for medication, go and lay down or ask for things to help with the sources of his pain. We rewarded him when he could go without engaging in behaviors that were causing him trouble instead of punishing him for them. He also learned to do many things for himself such as cooking, cleaning the house, mowing the yard, riding a bike and many other things also so that he became proud of what he could do.

One of the things that we had to teach him was not only that he needed to stop the threats and the damage to others' property but that simply asking forgiveness didn't make everything okay. People might forgive him but that did not mean that they would want him back in their homes or let them use their things if he was going to threaten and use language they did not appreciate around them. But we also learned what it meant to forgive others and to go on. In this passage, Jesus told his disciples that they must forgive others as God forgives us. We like this young man all have areas of our life with which we struggle in which we continually sin against God and others. It may be covetousness,

talking about others behind their backs, becoming angry easily, having lustful thoughts, or simply not being loving to others. But God is always willing to forgive us if we like David in Psalms 51 are truly sorry for what we have done. And he simply says to us I forgive you, go and sin no more.

Like our young man though we have to learn that the forgiveness of God does not mean that we do not suffer the consequences of our sins. The consequences still happen. But God wants us to also understand that He expects us to forgive others as often as He forgives us and to simply to say to them I forgive you, go and sin no more. And like Him, He expects us to do what we can to help, love and support them with their struggles, and with the sins that so easily beset them.

We have to look at what we can do as a friend to help those with problems in their lives. The first step though is in getting to know them. Becoming their friend and loving them in spite of their behaviors that offend us. It is as we do this that we begin to understand God's love for us. In the book of Luke Jesus helps us understand the great difference between what God has forgiven us and how He expects of us to forgive others. He tells them a parable in which a master forgives one of his servants for a debt of 10,000 talents. Now a talent refers to between 50 to 80 pounds of gold or silver which was the equivalent of what a person could earn over 15 years of work. In other words he owed his master the equivalent of 150,000 years of labor at that time. When he was forgiven though he turned right around and refused to forgive another servant for a debt of 100 denarius, which was the equivalent of 100 days of labour. When we hear this parable we are immediately angry at the servant and want him punished, but we are that servant. We so often are not willing to forgive others for things after God has forgiven us. And as Jesus states in the Lord's prayer, He will only be willing to forgive us our sins if we are willing to forgive others.

This is part of what it means to be born again. To see things from God's perspective of love and forgiveness. It is only when the light of Jesus' love comes into our lives that we are able to forgive others as we are willing to forget about ourselves and our possessions. It is why Jesus told His disciples that they must choose between loving wealth and loving God. When we love

wealth we find it very difficult to forgive others who we believe in some way threaten either ourselves or our wealth This is why we must constantly ask God's help to forgive others because it is not in our own nature to be forgiving.

**Prayer: Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.**

Mr. James Joy  
Calhoun First Presbyterian Church  
Calhoun, Georgia  
Advent, 2011

Thursday, December 1, 2011

Zephaniah 3: 14- 20

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**“OUR REASON FOR REJOICING”**

**Zephaniah 3: 17-18a “The Lord, your God,  
is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory;  
He will rejoice over you with gladness,  
He will renew you in His love;  
He will exult over you with loud singing  
as on a day of festival.”**

Are you experiencing this “wonderful” time of year the same way I am? Are you overwhelmed, stressed, and not sure if you are going to survive what is ahead? Work, exams, visiting relatives, and just plain seasonal ‘business’ are getting in the way of a ‘Holly Jolly Christmas’. It makes me want to fall asleep and wake up when it is over. And then ... it happens. It is a small reminder that is simple and familiar. A carol playing on the supermarket radio while I am (impatiently!) waiting in the check out line. Or a call from an old friend, wondering if I am free for a cup of coffee on one of the many trips home to New Jersey. It is unexpected, perhaps I initially view it as an intrusion, and something that will slow me down...but that is the point. God is calling me to rejoice!

In today's Scripture, God gives us a promise of complete reassurance. God will remove judgment, rejoice over us with gladness, renew us in love, and exult over us with singing. No more weakness, oppression, or pain. God will bring us home!

Especially at this time of year, this promise is welcome. I remind myself to be incredibly hopeful. I look at my to-do list and know that God will be by my side throughout the whole journey home for the holidays. There is no reason to be afraid, but every reason to rejoice!

**PRAYER: God who prepares our hearts to welcome Jesus. Remove the anxiety, stress, and sadness that may blunt the joy of the season and the hope Your presence brings. Restore us, God. Wake us up and keep us alert with the expectant hope. Let Your face shine. Strengthen us and give us enough hope to keep us from complacency and keep us living faithfully. We need Your saving grace, God, this day, and every day of life. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.**

Ms. Erika Jones Sealing  
Former Director of Christian Education  
Mt. Hebron Presbyterian Church  
Ellicott City, Maryland  
Advent, 2011

Friday, December 2, 2011

Luke 1: 26- 38

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**"LET IT BE WITH ME"**

**Luke 1: 38 "Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.'"**

Our daughter called from college the other day to tell us about the calendar she and her roommate had made. This brightly colored chart, mounted for all to see, would allow everyone in the dorm to participate in the daily ceremony of counting down to Christmas.

Suddenly, every girl on the floor was making lists and wondering how she could get everything done before leaving school for the Christmas holidays. I have to admit that their flurry of activity caused me to wonder about my list, as well. Regularly, on my "Things to Do During Advent" list, you can find shopping for gifts, wrapping paper, Christmas cards and stamps, making Christmas cookies and sweet breads, decorating the house inside and out, planning our annual Christmas Eve chili supper, and making arrangements for extended family visits. I'm tired just thinking about it!

Mary must have been tired too as she worked through her list of preparations for a very special baby. I try to imagine what she must have had on her list! At the very least, during her nine months of pregnancy, she and Joseph would have had to work through their difficult situation. Mary would have made plans to move from her parents' home. She would have been constantly dealing with reactions in the community. She would have been feeling more and more uncomfortable as the months moved along.

I am struck by Mary's mindset as she embarked on this powerful time in her life. Matthew shares Mary's words, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Those are certainly not the words I've been pondering for myself as I begin preparations for the upcoming Christmas season. Of course, I know what the real reason for the season is...everyone does. It is all about the birth of Christ, about God coming to earth to become human out of God's unimaginable love for us, and God's saving grace for us all. We sing the Advent hymns, and we hear the Christmas scriptures, so my heart should be in line with Mary's prayer, but, alas, it is not.

So, this year, I'm making a change. I want to be more like Mary. I want to start every day with Mary's words, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." That is how I'll start my Christmas list, and perhaps I will see God move in me in a new way during this Advent season.

**Prayer: Good and gracious God, during this Advent season, we ask for extra mercy on our busy lives. Take from us all that leads us away from you, and grant us all the treasures**

**that come from serving you. In the strong name of your Son,  
Jesus, we pray. Amen.**

Mrs. Suzie Lane, Elder  
Donelson Presbyterian Church  
The Logos Ministry  
Nashville, Tennessee  
Advent, 2005

**Saturday, December 3, 2011**

**Isaiah 9: 1- 6**

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**TO DEMUR FROM JOY**

**Isaiah 9: 2 “The people who walked in darkness have seen  
a great light; those who lived in a land of deep  
darkness – on them has light shined.”**

To demur from joy at Christmastime  
seems a sad and wasteful loss  
of self-indulgent happiness...  
a dour practice much derived  
from too much guilt and loss of soul...  
a poorly rendered homily  
that preaches poverty of self  
depriving us of all those things  
that feel so good and seem so right.  
Like Scrooge’s undigested bit of broth  
that took the blame for Marley’s ghost  
we humbug gracious charity  
and spirits lightened by the cause  
of seasonal frivolity.  
We count as loss the happiness  
from time not used or money spent  
on gifts that bare our brittle hearts  
and display love without restraint  
from oughts and shoulds that rule our lives...  
lost treasures from a time of bliss,  
and childlike days before the world  
was “too much with us, late and soon,”

and carefree joys had passed away  
to adult ways and drudgery.  
Twin evils, these that weigh us down...  
that bind us to the dark of night.  
Yet happiness, if for a day, allows  
an undemuring second chance  
for sweet release that transcends pain  
in a world too full of woe.  
Given such a second chance,  
I would choose the startled joy  
of shepherds warming by a fire,  
or wisemen guided by a star  
that leads to love and angel songs,  
for to us a Child is born,  
unto us a Son is given.

**Prayer: God grant us the joy of Christmas that it may live  
within our hearts this Advent tide and through each day of  
our lives. In the name of the Prince of Peace we ask it. Amen**

Rev. Phil Leftwich, Honorably Retired  
Presbytery of Middle Tennessee  
Brentwood, Tennessee  
Advent, 1999

**Sunday, December 4, 2011**

**Luke 2: 8- 20**

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**SINGING WITH ANGELS**

**Luke 2: 13- 14 (The Message) “At once the angel  
was joined by a huge angelic choir singing God’s praises:  
‘Glory to God in the heavenly heights, peace to all men  
and women on earth who please Him’.”**

Each year it seems that the celebration of Christmas begins  
earlier. It used to be (or so I was led to believe) that the  
celebration of Christmas did not start until the day after  
Thanksgiving. This year, I saw stores already decked out in  
holiday cheer at the first of October. Before long, maybe we can

just celebrate Christmas year round! That may sound like a good idea to some, but for the most part, such things just aggravate me. I must admit however, that for me, Christmas MUSIC is a different matter altogether.

I just love the songs and the hymns that we sing at Christmas time! I especially love those songs that speak to the true essence of the Christmas celebration. Each year, I wait as long as I can bear to wait to break out the Christmas CD's, but usually by early November (at the latest), they have made their way into my cd player. I love "Hark the Herald Angels Sing!" I revel in the majesty of "Joy to the World" and the grandeur of "O Come All Ye Faithful. The stillness and the peace of "O Little Town of Bethlehem" and "Silent Night" have a way of slowing down my racing life as I reflect on the story that they tell of the God who came to us as a Baby lying in a humble manger.

There is something very special to me about music! And there is something extraordinary about the music that characterizes this holy season. The words of these ancient hymns have a way of telling the story of Jesus' birth in a way that even the best of sermons could only hope for. They remind us through lyric, through music, and through the emotion that those words and sounds elicit in us of the reason for this holy celebration. They remind us of the God who put on skin and came to be with us – in the midst of our everyday lives. They tell of a Savior who came as a little baby, to stand with us in our struggles, and to wash away the sin that so stains our souls. Perhaps what the words of these songs remind us of most of all is the simple yet profound fact that God loves us with a love that will never die, and that God showed that love most powerfully through the gift of His only Son.

During this Advent season, take time to listen to the songs of Christmas. Listen to the hymns that tell of the birth of the Messiah. Listen to the music that brings to life that ancient story of God made flesh and come to live with us. For that message is the true reason for this season. It is the message of which the angels sang. And it is the message that will bring joy to our hearts and make us want to join in with the angelic choirs as we too sing praises to our God.

**Prayer: Holy God, we thank you for the gift of your Son Jesus who came into our world to wash away the stain of sin from our hearts. We thank you for the angelic choirs who teach us to sing praises to you. We thank you for the songs of Christmas which remind us of your undying love for us. And we thank you for the praises that those songs bring to our lips and to our hearts. During this holy season, help us to focus on the joy of the Messiah's birth. And grant us the blessing that we might slow down long enough to hear the voices of angels as they sing to you, "Glory to God in the heavenly heights, peace to all men and women on earth who please Him"! Amen**

Rev. Pete Ullmann, Pastor  
Calhoun First Presbyterian Church  
Calhoun, Georgia  
Advent, 2005

**A CHRISTMAS CREED  
Written by: Ted. R. Witt Sr.  
United Methodist Clergy (1909-2000)**

**I believe** in Christmas because I believe in both God and humanity.

**I believe** in the beauty of Christmas, which began in Bethlehem.  
**I believe** in the eternal nature of Christmas, which is dressed out in eternal love.

**I believe** in the glory of Christmas, because peace is found in its celebration.

**I believe** in Christmas because it dares me to be a noble and righteous person all the year.

**I believe** in Christmas because it affords me an excellent opportunity to be thoughtful and generous.

**I believe** in Christmas because it brings the best to the front. I am at my best at Christmas time.

**I believe** that Christ and Christmas belong together.

**I believe** that Christ and Christmas belong in my heart.

**As confirmation** of my belief in Christmas, I pass God's peace and wish all persons a merry and holy Christmas.

Monday, December 5, 2011

Romans 5: 1- 5

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**“A STRANGE TRADITION”**

**Romans 15: 13 “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”**

The Advent candles symbolize that Christ is the Light of the World and the first candle of Advent symbolizes hope. As I reflect this holiday season, I wonder if our hope is evident to those who are non-believers. I remember in elementary school being assigned to write a short story on what an alien would think of an activity on Earth. I wrote about my favorite sport of soccer. What would an alien think looking down from above on this battle taking place on a 100 yard field? What strange ritual has players of different colors (uniforms) running around beating (kicking) a ball. What is that round thing anyway and why does it bounce? Perhaps after 90 minutes of play an outsider would realize that the goal of the game is to get the round object into the rectangular object with a net that catches the ball.

Move ahead twenty years and I was reminded of this as it applies to Christmas when I was deployed to the Middle East. The third country nationals (often from India) who ran the dining facilities would attempt to make the holidays as special as possible. They would find holiday decorations and attempt to decorate as they imagined an American would do. What impression did these non-Christians have of Christmas given their limited interactions with Christians? It may not be surprising that they decorated the Christmas tree with a dreidel and it certainly was not surprising that they understood the wrapped presents under the tree were a key part of the tradition. The one that I still do not understand is the intricately carved, nearly full size butter sculpture they made of the “Christmas Pig”! I still do not understand why they related this to Christmas, but needless to say none of their images of Christmas related to the real meaning of this holiday.

Closer to home, what do non-Christians in our own community think of this holiday called Christmas? Crowded parking lots at the mall, frenzied tearing open of gifts from a live tree in the house, singing of songs about an overweight man that

mysteriously travels the world in 24 hours, and what about the lighting of candles at a building with a steeple?

As I reflect on this story I think that perhaps this year we can think of ways to better model the meaning of Christmas by helping others in our community, donating items to the shelters, volunteering at the food bank and perhaps most importantly in the time we have with non-Christians, we can show them the hope that is in our hearts. A hope that cannot be seen by looking down from miles above, and a hope that may be lost in some of the traditions of the season, but a hope that lives in our hearts and mind.

**PRAYER: Lord, help my family and me appreciate the hope that the birth of your Son has given this world, guide us in our actions as we attempt to display outwardly the hope we feel in our hearts and the joy of this holiday season that we celebrate as believers. Help us share our hope with others, to hold out our candle for all to see. Amen.**

Mr. Dave Barrett, Elder  
Mt. Hebron Presbyterian Church  
Ellicott City, Maryland  
Advent, 2011

Tuesday, December 6, 2011

Luke 2: 1- 20

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**“CHRISTMAS MEMORIES”**

**Luke 2: 15b “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.”**

Reflecting on my life, I find it wonderful that one day I started believing in God. My two sisters and I were baptized when it became a way to be safe - safe from the Nazis who were deporting Jews and others to concentration camps. My parents thought that if we were baptized, we would be protected. And we were. But being baptized did not mean much to us. We were not raised in a Christian home because of our baptism. My father told us some Biblical stories, mainly from the Hebrew Bible, since he was Jewish. My mother, who was Protestant, did not try. There

were no Protestant churches near the hamlet where we were hiding.

After the war, we moved back to the city and (pushed by my Godmother) my youngest sister and I started going to Sunday School. I learned about Jesus. As a child, the story from the Bible I preferred was the one telling of Jesus' birth: Noël, Christmas. We did not celebrate it in our home. No Christmas tree for us. I believe that we received some gifts, but it was not in celebration of the coming of our Lord on earth.

So, for me, the Christmas celebration we had in our Church was very special. There was a Christmas tree. The only light came from the candles burning on the tree. And all the children received a little gift (quite often a big cookie and an orange). We sang hymns telling the marvelous story of what God had done for us. There I felt that God loves me, that Jesus is with me everywhere I go, that the Spirit is comforting me and sustaining me.

Every year, I waited for that moment in the life of our Church where Jesus' birth was celebrated in a very simple way. Every year, I waited for that moment when we could "go to see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us."

**Prayer: Lord, I am grateful for all the persons who have taught me how much you love me. I give you praise for your wonderful gift to us, your Son, Jesus Christ. Forgive us for having turned Jesus' humble birth into a way for making and spending money, instead of for being the way to be reminded over and over that you gave your only Son so that we will have life. By your Holy Spirit, open our eyes so that we will realize that you are the reason why we celebrate Christmas. In the name of your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, Amen**

Mrs. Aline Patte, Elder  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
Nashville, Tennessee  
Advent, 2005

Wednesday, December 7, 2011

Matthew 25:35- 40

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"THE WOOD STOVE"

**Matthew 25: 34- 35 "Then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.'"**

For 25 years our family has heated with wood. Sometimes I'll open the stove door and see nothing but darkness. I will stir the ashes searching--ah!-- a live coal. A light in the darkness. I'm grateful---add some kindling and dry wood and the fire is blazing again.

John 8:12 tells us that Jesus is the Light of the world. How can we focus on Jesus the Light, the Babe of Bethlehem in this busy season? We are bombarded by bargains, requests, invitations, and extra responsibilities. Yet, Jesus promises if we follow Him - the Light of the world - we will not walk in darkness.

Matt 25:35-40 hardly seems like a Christmas passage, but it can be. Whenever we help the needy, feed them, clothe them, visit them, meet their needs--we can do it unto Jesus. Jesus says when we help the least of these we are honoring Him. This season we need to strike a balance: remembering family and friends, and giving Jesus His gifts as well. Jesus' gifts are those we give to anyone in need. Let His Light shine through us this year.

**Prayer: Father God, help me strive for a balance this season. Remind me daily to do for the least of these that I might honor You. In Jesus' Name I pray. Amen**

Mrs. Lyric Sullivan  
Grace Bible Church  
Dayton, Tennessee  
Advent, 2011

Thursday, December 8, 2011

Mark 11: 20- 25

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"KEEPING YOUR FOCUS"

**Mark 11: 22- 23 "Jesus answered them, 'Have faith in God. Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you.'"**

As we approach this Christmas Season, the time of the year when we celebrate Christ's birth and spend time with family and friends, it is easy to forget the rest of the world and even what goes on during the rest of the year. With everything going on in our busy lives today, it is easy to get caught up in our jobs, our school work, and our other activities and we forget what we should be focusing our lives on.

During the Christmas Season we do get caught up in the hustle and bustle, but we need to be reminded that this is our time to refocus our lives in the direction that Christ wants us to. This is the time to refresh our hearts and our minds with the love that God has given us. After all, He gave us the greatest gift any father could give. He gave us His Son! In doing this He asked us to do one thing - to have faith in Him.

I feel that during this holiday season, even though we do get busy and we do focus on other things than the true meaning of Christmas, we are able to be renewed and revived in this faith. During this season, we can gain the knowledge that no matter what happens in the world around us, we are surrounded by people that care for us and love us, and most importantly we hear the Good News that God loves us.

I feel that this takes place through the time spent with family and friends. It takes place during this magical time of year - the time of laughing and sharing stories. A time of singing Christmas carols and cooking big holiday dinners (or as in my family the famous Caldwell Family Christmas rolls). A time of going to church and watching the Advent Candles be lit each week, hearing the Christmas Story read and remembering why we celebrate this wonderful holiday. All these reasons help remind us that when

God gave us His most precious gift, His Son, all He wanted in return was for us to have faith in Him. So this holiday season, I am asking you while you are spending time with loved ones, to remember the love of Christ and to revive you faith in God. After all, all good things come to those who believe and trust in Jesus.

**Prayer: Heavenly Father, I pray that you will remind us what this time of the year is truly about. I pray that while you bring us together with family and friends, that you will never let us forget those that have left this earth to be with you. I pray that during this time of celebration, that you take us, mold us and shape us to be the Christians you want us to be. And Heavenly Father, I pray that you will guide and protect us, and help us to know all the love that is in this world. Help remind us that no matter how busy our lives may get, you will always be there for us, we just need to stop and take a break and realize it. I pray that you be with those that have not found you yet Father, and I pray that you will help us to be the best that we can be and to live the best Christian Lives that we can. Thank you for all that you have done for us and thank you for sending your Son, and for giving us the most precious gift. Amen**

Ms. Katie Flippin, Elder  
Windwood Presbyterian Church  
Spring, Texas  
Advent, 2004

Friday, December 9, 2011 Matthew 11:28-30, Luke 15:11-32

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"COMING HOME – PART 1"

**Matthew 11:28 "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."**

**Luke 15:20, 22-24 "But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and was filled with compassion, and he ran and embraced him and kissed him ... But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe--the best one-- and**

**put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found! And they began to celebrate.”**

You’ve seen it on TV. A child is at school, presenting a report to the class, or preparing to meet a special guest who is visiting the school. Outside the classroom, a man or woman dressed in combat fatigues anxiously awaits the moment that is almost at hand! And then it happens. The soldier steps into the classroom; the child looks at the person who is entering the room and, in an instance, there is a moment of recognition. The child runs over and is enveloped in the arms of the soldier! At long last, the child is hugging his or her parent back from serving overseas – for the first time in six or nine or twelve months. The eyes of the two participants (as well as the eyes of all who observe the scene) are filled with “tears of joy” at this special reunion.

It seems to me that this scene speaks in part to what is so special about Christmas – that there is a very definite sense of “Coming Home” with Christmas. Many times family members have been away at school, or travelling for work, or serving in the military, and so there is, literally, a coming home. But, in another way, I think the traditions of Christmas bring us back to our “spiritual home” from which we have journeyed during the year. Too often, like the prodigal son, we venture off into the “far country,” far away from home. Or, like the elder son, we get caught up in all the duties and responsibilities of life, and fail to appreciate the blessings that God is bestowing on us each day. But, as we decorate our homes, and sing familiar carols; as we come to worship and light candles, we are reminded of the importance of “coming home.”

It was Augustine who said, “Our hearts are restless, until they rest in Thee, O God.” As we draw near to God, and God draws near to us during this special season, and the darkness and stress of our lives fades away, and we are filled with light and joy! We are home once again!

**Prayer: Lord God, during this Advent season, help us to remember your love. Help us to see more clearly the ways we distance ourselves from you. By your Spirit, bring us**

**home again, so that we might experience anew the wonder of your embrace. This we pray in the name of Him who is your greatest gift, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

Rev. Sid Venable, Pastor  
Mt. Hebron Presbyterian Church  
Ellicott City, Maryland  
Advent, 2011

**Saturday, December 10, 2011**

**Galations 4:4-7**

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**“COMING HOME – PART 2”**

**Luke 2: 6b-7a “... the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son...”**

**Galations 4: 4-7 “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God”**

This year, for the second time, I became a grandfather! If memory serves, my son called me in late May or early June to share the good news of this event that was to come. During the summer, there were pictures of the baby’s room – the painting that had been done; the new crib that was purchased. And there were inquiries as to how everyone was doing in getting ready for the new arrival. As September came, the excitement increased. Our daughter-in-law was QUITE ready for this baby to be born! And then, in the first part of October (a week early), Ephraim made his entrance into the world! What fun it was to see the pictures of the baby; to hear the stories of his birth; to learn how our other grandchild was adjusting to having a new brother in the family. And, a day or two later, we learned that everybody was home and beginning to settle into a new routine.

The addition of this new baby into our family, got me to thinking about the season of Christmas – which is also about the birth of a baby. And I wonder if there aren't some appropriate parallels. First, prior to the baby's birth, there was a time of preparation – of getting the house ready for the new addition to the family. So, if we are going to have a new child joining our family this Christmas, what preparations do we need to undertake? How can we make space in our hearts and lives for this little one? Are there things we need to discard so we can be ready? How might our lives change because of this new arrival?

And then there is the birth. What kind of emotions does Christ's coming into the world engender in us? How do we spread the news? What do we do with the joy and excitement, the wonder and amazement that we feel as a result of this new being that is now part of our lives?

And then it might be good to think about how our lives will change when we "bring this baby home" with us. Ephraim is demanding a great deal of time and energy from his parents. What kind of demands does baby Jesus make on our lives? How can we carve out time in our days and weeks to nurture the relationship that hopefully will develop with the Christ-child. Too often Christmas passes and our lives fall back into their normal routine. With a new baby in the house, all the routines of life get turned upside down.

In this season when we celebrate the birth of the Savior, it may help to imagine Jesus as an actual baby that is being born, and is coming to live with us!

**Prayer: Lord God: the birth of your Son fills us with joy and wonder and gratitude and amazement, with love and devotion and praise. Send us your Spirit so that we can respond to your glory. Open our eyes to the many, amazing ways you are at work among us. Help us to prepare for this new addition to our lives, both now and in the days ahead. Amen.**

Rev. Sid Venable, Pastor  
Mt. Hebron Presbyterian Church  
Ellicott City, Maryland  
Advent, 2011

Sunday, December 11, 2011

Matthew 2: 1-12

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**"FOLLOW THE STAR"**  
(an Advent song)

**Matthew 2: 1-2 "In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the Child who has been born King of the Jews? For we observed His star at its rising!'"**

**Verse 1:**

Starlight, star bright,  
Reminds us of another night,  
So far away and long ago  
And strangers led by a star's warm glow.  
A father's sigh and shepherds' awe,  
A newborn child in golden straw.  
A manger stall and braying beasts  
Inviting us to know God's peace.

**Verse 2:**

Starlight, so near so far,  
His light surrounds us where we are,  
Dispelling darkness, woes and fears,  
A healing love to dry our tears.  
His starlight shines to lead the way,  
To guide us through each precious day.  
With thanks and praise we humbly kneel  
For God's love and the joy we feel.

**Chorus:**

Follow the star, follow the kings,  
Follow the shepherds down on their knees,  
Hear the words of angels, see Mary's tired smile,  
Feel the love of Bethlehem just a little while.  
Worship the baby lying in the hay,  
Unwrap the gift God gave to you. . .  
On the very first Christmas day.

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Monday, December 12, 2011

1 John 1: 5- 10

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"AWAITING THE LIGHT"

**1 John 1: 5 "This is the message we have heard from Him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in Him there is no darkness at all."**

When sin entered God's beautiful garden, man experienced a separation from God who is light. There was an absence of light; the world was in utter darkness. People lost their way. Prophets spoke of a time when light would come into the darkness. Isaiah said, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness - on them has light shined." Micah answers the question of "where". The Light will come to the little town of Bethlehem. (Micah 5:2) Isaiah tells "how"; "The virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and they shall name Him Emmanuel which means God with us." (Isaiah 7:14) According to the Prophets who spoke for God, One was coming who would bring light to the world, so God's people waited to be delivered from the darkness. The Psalmist says, "The Lord is my Light and my Salvation ....wait for the Lord" (Psalm 27:1-4); so the people waited.

Then, on that first Christmas, the wait paid off! The angel of the Lord announced to the Shepherds, "....I bring you Good news of great joy for all the people. (Luke 2:10) "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us....(John 1:14). The Glory of God brought light to the world in the birth of a little baby boy born in a stable in Bethlehem to a virgin named Mary. He was God with us, and our souls were delivered from the darkness of death. When all grown up, that Christmas Baby would one day confirm, "I am the Light of the world; whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.(9:5)

Light, that thing that enables us to have vision, shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it. Think about it: that little nightlight almost invisible in the light of day shines bright in the darkness of night - dark cannot overcome it. What a Christmas gift from God! Light! We are children of light; we walk in the light of life; we get it; we've got it!

Now, as we walk in God's gift of Light, we need to let our light shine so others can see it and get it too. Matthew 4:16 says, "The people who sat in darkness have seen a great Light..." The Wise Men from the East followed the light of a star and found Him who is Light. Like that star, the light which shines in us might lead others to Him who is Light. MERRY CHRISTMAS!

**Prayer: Loving God, thank you for the story of Christmas and your gracious gift of your Son. We ask that you would remind us this Advent of the plan of salvation that you brought to completion through Jesus. Help us to remember Him during this season of waiting. Amen**

Mrs. Carole Ullmann, Elder  
Palma Ceia Presbyterian Church  
Tampa, Florida  
Advent, 2011

Tuesday, December 13, 2011

Psalm 100: 1- 5

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STOP AND THANK

**Psalm 46: 10 "Be still and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth."**

**Psalm 100: 4 "Enter His gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise. Give thanks to Him, bless His name!"**

I have a figurine of Santa, hat in hand, prayerfully kneeling beside a manger that holds a figurine of the Christ Child. I keep it out all year long. It reminds me to stop and thank!

In the fantasy world of the Christmas holiday season there are reindeer that fly through the air pulling a small sleigh with "a driver so lively and quick". I have always enjoyed the poem "A Visit From St Nick". We have all heard it before and we know it from childhood. Remember St. Nick? He was always jolly and did things quickly.

The first time I saw the figurine with Santa pausing at the manger, it struck me - even Santa, St. Nick, Father Christmas, or whatever else you might call him; even he stopped at the manger to say "Happy Birthday, Jesus and thanks for everything."

During Advent we should also stop and thank Jesus for all He has done and all He continues to do for us. If Santa has time, so do we!

**Dear Father, help us to stop and thank You for our blessings throughout this season of waiting and anticipating. Your love is truly the reason for this holy season. Amen**

Ms. Helen Reed, R.N.  
Carter Street United Methodist Church  
Radford, Virginia  
Advent, 2005

**Wednesday, December 14, 2011                      Philippians 4: 4- 7**  
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**"LET THERE BE PEACE"**

**Luke 2: 14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom He favors."**

"WELL, IF YOU WANT TO BREAK TRADITION." I can still see my son, Sam, sitting in the back seat of our car with his arms crossed and an extremely frustrated look on his face as he made this statement. Our family was setting out on our annual trip to pick out our Christmas tree. We always went to Metzler's for our trees. In addition to the trees, there was an array of Christmas decorations, carols and special treats that made the trip a special event. We always had to visit with Elvis the Cat while our tree was being prepared for the trip home.

This particular year, our schedules were hectic. Drew suggested we go to the high school to pick out our tree because it was closer.

Peace – Peace is a state of harmony. Clearly, this particular year, our lives were going in four different directions and we were trying to fit Christmas in with all the other "stuff".

I think Sam was telling us to SLOW DOWN! Remember what Christmas is all about and that having family together is important.

I know traditions such as picking out the Christmas tree, watching favorite Christmas movies, stringing popcorn and baking cookies are not part of the original Christmas story. For our family, our traditions help us escape from the craziness that has taken over our lives. When we gather together we are in a peaceful place where we can focus on the true meaning of Christmas.

Take a moment to be quiet before the Lord and be thankful for the peace that Jesus can give.

**PRAYER: Dear Heavenly Father; thank you for this wonderful time of year. Help us to find peace in our lives. Help us to pass on peace to others so we may focus on what Christmas is really all about. Thank you for giving us the greatest gift, your Son Jesus. In His name we pray. Amen.**

Ms. Patti Wilson, Elder  
Mt. Hebron Presbyterian Church  
Ellicott City, Maryland  
Advent, 2011

**Thursday, December 15, 2011                      1 Corinthians 2: 6- 16**  
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**THE HUSHED MOMENT**

**1 Corinthians 2: 9 "But, as it is written, 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love Him'."**

**"No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in."**

A great deal of our Christmas celebration presents a resounding message of Joy to the World, and there is something appropriately wonderful about that noise. After all, it was news so good that heaven could not keep it a secret but had to break forth with a choir of a thousand angels gloriously proclaiming the Gospel. At some point every celebration of Christmas ought to convey something of that majesty and joy. The children's service on Christmas Eve at Palma Ceia Presbyterian Church lends itself nicely to this.

However, have you ever overheard the blessed silence of Christmas? Some of the Christmas carols speak of it. "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given."

"The world in solemn stillness lay to hear the angels sing." "O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie, above thy deep and dreamless streets the silent stars go by."

Usually I stumble onto this silence serendipitously. I came down to the sanctuary late on a Saturday night in December to go over the sermon, and there in the large room was a hush that seemed almost mystically reverent in its anticipation of the morning services. In a pediatric wing of a hospital I slipped into a room and a mother was asleep in a recliner next to the bed of her child who had broken a very high fever. There silent sleep was a more eloquent prayer of thanksgiving than any I might have spoken. Many people find the best time of the day to be the earliest hours of the morning. To be up and quietly about before the rest of the world has awakened seems like a sort of matins celebrating the possibilities the day contains.

So it is with the blessed silences we stumble onto in Advent. They quietly direct our attention to the astonishing creativity of God, which is, to our surprise, more than we imagined. The silence represents a space that transcends any human capacity to fill it. And the silence in this space is the initial sound of the human recognition that the sovereign, sanctified love of God has chosen to come toward us. Of course there is a glorious "excelsis deo" which will appropriately follow, indeed, which must follow as heaven and nature and humanity sings in adoration. But the first sound that greets the incarnation is the silence of the dawning awareness, our slight comprehension of the immensity of God's

initiative in Jesus Christ. It is akin to the silence you might hear as someone unwraps a gift they never dared to imagine anyone would give them.

This is a blessed silence and I will be listening for it between now and December 25<sup>th</sup>. It is not the sort of noise you make or go looking for. But I encourage you to pray that God will help you to discern it. The virtues of humility, compassion, and service often precede it. But it can also arrive completely unexpected and without any of our preparation. In every instance, in every case, it is always a divine gift.

**Prayer: God of the "still small voice", help us during this season to take the time to listen for You speaking to us. Guide us in Your ways and awaken us to the great hope You provide in Jesus Christ. Amen.**

Rev. John T. DeBevoise, Senior Pastor  
Palma Ceia Presbyterian Church  
Tampa, Florida  
Advent, 1998

**Friday, December 16, 2011**

**Luke 2: 1- 7**

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**NO VACANCY**

**Luke 2: 7 "And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped Him in bands of cloth and laid Him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."**

**Hebrews 13: 2 "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."**

What are you looking for? That is a question that could be asked to each of us. We look for many things during the course of our lives. We search for things that will bring us happiness and joy. We seek after things that will satisfy our wants and desires. We look for things that will give our lives purpose and meaning. Yet often when we are looking for something in particular, it can have

the negative effect of causing us to miss out on something we need to see; something that may even be right before our eyes.

For that reason, I wonder about the inn keeper who was instrumental in the Baby Jesus being laid in a manger on the night of His birth. Luke doesn't go into a lot of detail. He simply says that Mary "laid her Child in a manger because there was no place for them in the inn". But why was there no place in the inn? Was it literally because there was NO ROOM? Was it because (although there were empty rooms) all the rooms were reserved for other more important guests? Was it because Mary and Joseph were not among those who could pay premium prices for lodging in the hometown of King David? Could it have been that the keeper of the inn was too busy looking for kings and other dignitaries to fill his hotel that he failed to recognize the King of Heaven and Earth who was about to be born that night either in his inn, or in the stable out back?

I have never been one to want to be critical of this man who declared his inn to be full. Maybe there was just nothing more he could do. Maybe there were just no more beds. Maybe he was just unable to see any other possibility. It has been said that at least he gave this young couple a place to get out of the cold and the wind. Yet I can't help but wonder if things would have been different if that inn keeper had only known... if he had just been privy to the information that we know... that this Child to be born in his stable out back was the Messiah of God's people.

The writer of Hebrews gives us an imperative that I imagine the keeper of the inn would have liked to have heard before that night Mary and Joseph showed up on his doorstep. "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." Do you believe that? Have you seen it play out in your life? Have you experienced that satisfaction of helping someone in need only to find out later that the one you helped was an angel in disguise?

The logical conclusion for us from the story of the inn keeper is that we must make a place for Jesus in our hearts and in our lives. Certainly, the question deserves asking, "Where in our lives does Jesus find a no-vacancy sign?" If we can recognize those places – even in the midst of our Christmas preparations – we would do

well to identify those problems and to MAKE room for Jesus. For Jesus doesn't ask for A PLACE in our lives. He asks for THE CENTRAL PLACE in our lives. And when we start making room for Jesus, the truth is that we may very well find that we too are among those who are entertaining angels without knowing it.

**Prayer: God of the Bethlehem manger, we ask that you would teach us the art of showing hospitality to one another. So often we get caught up in the busy-ness of our lives. We are easily distracted by the hustle and bustle world that we live in. Even in the midst of preparing for the celebration of Christmas we are often blinded to the real meaning of this special time of year- distracted by our obligations to others and the demands of our hectic lives. Help us to slow down during this holy season and to prepare the central place in our lives for the coming of our Lord Jesus. Help us to recognize the angels that come to us in the midst of life's ups and downs. And make us into the people you would have us to be. In Jesus' name we ask it. Amen**

Rev. Pete Ullmann, Pastor  
Calhoun First Presbyterian Church  
Calhoun, Georgia  
Advent, 2005

**Saturday, December 17, 2011**

**Matthew 5: 13- 16**

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"SALT & LIGHT"

**Matthew 5:16 "Let your light so shine before men,  
that they may see your good works and give glory to  
your Father who is in heaven." (RSV)**

Have you ever been out after dark and realized that you have forgotten to bring a flashlight? Have you ever forgotten to add salt to your favorite recipe? If you have ever made either of these mistakes you know the importance of light when you are out after dark and of salt when you are cooking.

In the fifth chapter of Matthew Jesus teaches us to be salt and light to the world. This is not so we can be praised, but so others will know the awesomeness of God. Without salt the world would be pretty tasteless and without light we would all be stumbling around in the dark. But how do we become salt and light?

During the Christmas season it is easy to show God's love to others. We buy gifts for children on the angel tree. We donate food to food banks and sometimes serve a meal. We even give money to charities. These are all good ways to follow Jesus' teachings. But God is just as interested in our attitudes as in our actions. 1 Samuel 16:7 says "man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

If attitudes, not just actions point to God, then maybe it isn't quite as easy to be salt and light as first thought. Are our hearts bright when we have to wait in crowded holiday lines at Walmart? Does our lengthy "to do" list cause us to lose our focus on Jesus? Do we let the stress and financial pressures of the season dull our lights?

The Christmas season can get very busy. It is easy to forget the blessings God has given us. Let's take time during Advent to remember the true reason for the season. Let God make our hearts and lives bright for Him so that we may be a light shining in this dark world. Let's show others the path to God by being both salt and light. When others see our lives, we want them to give praise to God.

**Prayer: Dear Lord, please help us to be salt and light to others during this Christmas season. Help us when the season gets busy to keep our focus on you. Help us to have good attitudes even when our lives are not going exactly the way we want. Keep our hearts bright. Amen**

Mrs. Dawn Ullmann  
Calhoun First Presbyterian Church  
Calhoun, Georgia  
Advent, 2011

**Sunday, December 18, 2011**

**Isaiah 43: 18- 21**

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**A NEW THING!**

**Isaiah 43: 18- 19 "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"**

A family sat around the dinner table and the mom and dad had been in an argument that day, and there was tension in the air. The family held hands to say the blessing. The father asked his little girl to pray, and with their heads bowed, she said this prayer... "God, it's Emily. How are you? Mom and dad are mad. I don't know why. We've got birds and toys and mashed potatoes and each other. Maybe you can get them to stop being mad. Please do, or it's just going to be you and me having any fun tonight. Amen."

There have been times in each of our lives when someone has made us mad, and we just can't seem to let go of it long enough to realize that "we've got birds and toys and mashed potatoes and each other!"

But with the help of God we can forgive rather than hold a grudge; we can love rather than hate; and we can forget the former sayings that separate us from another person and look to Christ for reconciliation.

**Prayer: God, in who new things spring forth, help us to forget the former things in our lives that cause us to be angry and bitter. In Jesus Christ, reconcile us to one another that we might be able to serve You as one family. Amen**

Rev. Pamela Rucker, Interim Pastor  
Nicholasville Presbyterian Church  
Nicholasville, Kentucky  
Advent, 1996

Monday, December 19, 2011

Philippians 4: 4- 9

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**ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE**

**Philippians 4: 8 “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”**

Attitudes! I'm so tired of the attitudes around my house. I have a three year old. My husband and I are also the youth directors of our church. I'm tired of the 'Tudes, as I call them. The 'Tudes have a life of their own some days, and it's NOT a positive thing! And once someone else's 'Tude gets going, here come my own 'Tudes acting up....and that's the point where I have to remember my purpose as a mom and a youth director - I am the example. I am to be the one with the RIGHT attitude that helps them shape THEIR attitudes. That's not easy to do in the middle of a tantrum, when I want to have one too! It's not easy to do in the middle of Christmas morning when my mom is pouting that my daughter didn't open her gift first. Not easy to do when my mother-in-law is pointing out again that she made some portion of the dinner without onions just for me, when I've never asked her to do that, and am always a little embarrassed that she brings it up again and again. However...."whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right....." That's what Jesus wants me to focus on. It is true that Christmas is Jesus' birthday. His birth was a noble birth, and we are heirs to His kingdom (we're also noble!) It is right to live at peace with others, as far as it depends on me, and that is my goal this December.... to endeavor to have an "attitude of gratitude" each day, and show, through my actions, who Jesus is.

**Prayer: Lord Jesus, teach me how to have an attitude of gratitude during this holy season and in the years to come. Help me to strive for those things that are true, honorable and just. Help me to live my life in such a way that I may be a positive example to those around me of the 'tudes that are found pleasing in your sight. Amen**

Mrs. Carrie Gruhn  
First American Baptist Church  
Anchorage, Alaska  
Advent, 2004

**THE GOOD SHEPHERD**

**Anonymous Writer, 1996**

**John 10: 11 (KJV) “I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth His life for the sheep.”**

The sheep know their shepherd,  
His voice they obey;  
He tends to their cares  
Through the night and the day.

The sheep safely enfolded;  
The shepherd will heed  
The call of a stray  
Taking care of its need.

Jesus is the good shepherd.  
His safety we seek  
Because He laid down  
His life for the sheep.

So, heed angels and sayings  
Of our Shepherd's birth.  
Give all praise to God,  
We sheep of the earth.

Tuesday, December 20, 2011

Luke 1: 1- 80

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**“WHO KNEW?”**

**Luke 1: 39- 45 “In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me,**

**that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”**

One day I found myself pondering a curious question: Who was the first person who knew that Jesus was the Christ? Who was the first believer? Mary? She was, after all, told by the Angel Gabriel, **“You are to conceive and bear a Son...He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High”** (v. 32). Or Joseph? He was told in a dream that the Child Mary carried was **“the One who is to save the people from their sins”** (Mt. 1: 21). Or the shepherds? Told by the angels **“...a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord”** (Lk. 2: 11) Or the Wise Men? Guided by a star to find **“the infant King of the Jews”** (Mt. 2:2) But all these people were **told about** the Child, the Son of God. Who just **knew?** Without being told, who just knew, deep within, that the Baby Jesus was the Christ, the salvation of the people?

If you read Chapter 1 of Luke’s Gospel, the surprising answer is Elizabeth – Mary’s cousin, wife of the Temple priest Zechariah, a righteous and faithful woman, childless (past her child-bearing prime) until blessed with an answer to prayer. At the sound of greeting from her cousin Mary, also with child (before her child-bearing prime), Elizabeth’s insides, the new life within her, leaps with joy and she spontaneously proclaims:

**“Blessed are you among women.....Blessed is the fruit of your womb....Blessed is she who believed....”** (Lk. 1: 42-45).

Elizabeth just knew. Her own experience of blessing gives her an openness to the extraordinary truth about Mary’s child, without being told. In this last week of Advent, we are challenged to act on what we **know** to be the truth about Christmas and what we “leap for joy” about. What God-given blessings are within us that help us see God at work in others? Do we greet people with a sense of the divine within them, helping them name and claim that God-life? Is the best gift we have to offer, support and hospitality in sharing God at work in each of us? In the end, we are touched by God in individual ways for a common purpose. How does that translate into what we do and say in these last frantic days before

Christmas? To whom might you be called as “an Elizabeth” this season?

**PRAYER: Good and gracious God, I praise and thank you for the gift of this day, for whatever it holds of busyness and rest. In these last days of Advent, I pray for faithfulness, like Elizabeth. I pray for acceptance of your blessing, like Elizabeth. I pray for the freedom to spontaneously acknowledge your blessing in others, like Elizabeth. I pray for the wisdom to recognize your work within me, like Elizabeth. Finally, I pause to remember, in gratitude, all those Elizabeths you placed in my life throughout the years. Amen.**

Mrs. Judith Morawa Venable  
Mt. Hebron Presbyterian Church  
Ellicott City, Maryland  
Advent, 2011

**Wednesday, December 21, 2011**

**1 John 2: 7- 17**

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**“GOD’S GIFT TO MAN IS LOVE FOR OTHERS”**

**1 John 2:9-11 (NIV) “Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a brother or sister is still in the darkness. Anyone who loves their brother and sister lives in the light, and there is nothing in them to make them stumble. But anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness. They do not know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded them.”**

Vickie was a young girl in a class I taught many years ago at Orange Grove Center in Chattanooga. It was a class of individuals with multiple disabilities one of which was a severe intellectual disability. But all of them had other disabilities as well such as Autism, Cerebral Palsy, and some were legally blind or deaf.

I learned many things from Vickie. I learned what was really important in life. I learned about love and loving others. Vickie met

me each morning with a large smile, and exuberance and love. She had to give me a kiss and a hug every chance she could. I can't remember ever seeing Vickie without a smile on her face. But Vickie was not a person that most of us would think of as having anything to be happy about. Vickie was about six years old. She spent her day strapped into a wheel chair, she was not really attractive, and because of her cerebral palsy she continually drooled and her nose was always running which also caused her to have an offensive odor. When you received a kiss or hug from Vickie your face was covered with saliva and secretions from her nose. She had to be fed, changed, bathed by others, but took it all with patience and love and lots of laughter. Vickie could not talk so it was difficult for her to let you know what she wanted. But I learned from Vickie that things such as wealth, beauty, power and the things of this earth are not really important. What is important is being satisfied with what you are and loving others. And that the problems I face every day can be met with a smile on my face. That I can love others as Vickie loved.

Jesus told His disciples that having food and raiment is all they need to be content. One of the things that I have observed over the years as I have worked with people with disabilities, the poor, people with addiction problems, people who were both the victims of abuse as well as those who victimized others is that how much one has is not related to whether one is happy. What is important is whether you have someone you love and who loves you. When we are going through the bad times in our lives we need someone who loves us to be able to face them. We can have all the beauty, power, and wealth but if we do not feel that someone loves us and cares about us nothing else really matters. We might have little in the way of material things, but if we have someone who is there and really loves us, then we have everything.

At the time of Christ most people owned little beside the clothes on their backs. Their homes were very simple, they slept on the floor and had almost no furniture in their homes. They sat on the floor, they ate on the floor, sometimes they simply used large leaves as their plates, they ate with their fingers. This was also true with the Native Americans here in this country. What was important was having enough food, clothing and shelter and having about them people who loved them. As our societies became more and more complex and more and more things were

invented we lusted after more and more and believed that we had to have more things to make us happy.

The truth is that there are very few things that we have in our lives that are really necessities. And they are not necessary to be happy. Covetousness makes us unhappy, but things do not make us happy. Loving others is what makes us happy. The memories of times spent with those we love makes us happy. Jesus came to bring light to this world and the light He brought was to help us understand that loving others is what needs to be the focus of our lives and that if we love others we will be happy. It is truly more blessed to give than to receive.

As we look at this season in which God gave us His most precious gifts of love and light, let each of us think about what it is that we have to give to light someone else's life by loving them. Look around you and find someone who needs someone to love them and become their friend this year, listen to them, spend time with them, share of what you have with them. Focus this year on what you can give of what you have, not on what you can acquire.

**Prayer: God grant me the ability to know the difference between the things of this earth and the things of heaven. Forgive me for my covetousness and greed and help me to devote myself to loving others as you loved me. Help my love for others and for you be the light that leads others to your love and light that they may know your loving kindness and forgiveness. Amen**

Mr. James Joy  
Calhoun First Presbyterian Church  
Calhoun, Georgia  
Advent, 2011

Thursday, December 22, 2011

Luke 1: 26- 38

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**"LET IT BE"**

**Matthew 1:38 "Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.'"**

Several weeks ago, I was riding alone in my car heading for home. I was listening to Ann Murray singing, "Let It Be." I had to be told later that this was an old Beatles' song. I heard the words, Mother Mary says to me, "Let it be; Let it be." I thought to myself, wasn't this Mary's response, more or less, to the news that she would bear the Son of God? What did these words mean in the context of this well-known oldie? When I got home, I looked up the passage to see Mary's response. What follows is what I read:

**“In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, ‘Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.’ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name Him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to Him the throne of His ancestor David’...**

**Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I am a virgin?’ And the angel said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the Child to be born will be holy; He will be called Son of God’...**

**Then Mary said, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’”**

I wondered would I be willing to have The Son of God born in me? Am I willing in my old age to be filled with the Holy Spirit and have my life altered by the Most High? It would mean of course that I must be the Lord's servant. There is no angel suggesting I bear the incarnate God, but being filled with the Holy Spirit is the possibility that came with the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus - the Son of God, the Lamb of God, the Christ.

**PRAYER: Father, I pray in this season, for myself and all others willing to be filled with the Holy Spirit, that we say, "Let it be." I pray that more and more people will come to**

**know you and love you and will allow your Spirit to be born in them. I pray for your Church that we bring forth the fruit of the Spirit and let love, joy and peace be the gifts we give this season. Amen.**

Mrs. Mary Lou Wright  
Mt. Hebron Presbyterian Church  
Ellicott City, Maryland  
Advent, 2011

**Friday, December 23, 2011**

**Matthew 2: 1- 12**

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**“OVERJOYED”**

**Matthew 2: 10 “When they saw the star,  
they were overjoyed!”**

I remember my mother making banners for Advent that hung on the walls of Ellis Grove Presbyterian Church. There were four of them – Hope, Peace, Joy and Love in different colors and with different scenes on each one.

The Joy banner was inspired by the Luke 2:10 passage about the shepherds and angels, “But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” But what if the Matthew 2:10 passage about the Magi had been used instead? “When they saw the star they were overjoyed?” Imagine instead of a Joy candle in the advent wreath, it was a pumped up, supersized, vivacious, over the top, unable to be contained, OVERJOYED candle? Visions of Roman candles and fireworks are dancing in my head.

What was it that caused these grown, learned, distinguished men to not only have joy, but to be overjoyed? They saw a star. They embraced a great light in a dark sky that led them to “the One who has been born the King of the Jews.” (Matthew 2:2) They believed, trusted, followed, found and gave with exuberant, little boy joy. May you be overjoyed by the gift of the Christ Child and find ways to share your overwhelming joy with those around you.

**Prayer: Dear God, help me to be overjoyed by the gift of your Son this day and to be aware of the many blessings in which I am blindly immersed. Open my eyes to neighbors around me with whom I can share joy in abundance. Amen**

Mrs. Carie Turner  
Financial Administrator  
Synod of Living Waters, PCUSA  
Advent, 2011

**Saturday, December 24, 2011**

**Matthew 25: 31- 46**

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**THE LEAST ONES**

**Matthew 25: 40 “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.’”**

In today’s culture, when most people think of Christmas, we usually think of gifts and giving. Truth be known most of us are like Charlie Brown. We go to our mailboxes every day hoping for a Christmas card. Lucky for us, we are not completely like Charlie Brown, for we do get them.

However, not everyone gets a gift or a Christmas Card. Many Americans, even many children are forgotten every year - especially, the town nut. You know the strange man who lives alone in the house down the street. Everyone knows him by sight, but no one knows his name.

Well, when I was going up, there was such a man. In fact I could see his house from my yard. He was very old and housebound. But, despite his immobility, he faithfully kept his yard. No one knew why he spent so much time keeping his yard. At least so I thought.

One Christmas learned his secret, for that Christmas my mother told me a wonderful story about this man. A story she said was true. It is a story that happened one Christmas, many years before.

One day my mother and her sister were walking down the street and they stopped to talk to the man. He was on his knees pulling weeds from around one of his large oak trees. He was wearing a frayed woolen jacket and a pair of worn garden gloves. His fingers were sticking out the ends, blue, blistered and cold.

Mom asked the man (his name was Harry) what he was doing. He responded that he was getting the yard in shape for his mother for Christmas. You see his mother loved the yard and especially the trees. His eyes brimmed with tears as he patted the old oak tree, a tree his mother had planted the year she was married. You see, he explained, my mother was all she had. She loved these trees and this yard, so I keep them in shape for her. The explanation so touched my mother and her sister that they spent the rest of the day pulling weeds around the tree.

At the end of the day, the man went quietly into his house. Quickly he returned with a ice cream sandwich and a quarter, which he gave to my mother and her sister. I wish I could give you more he said, but this is all I have.

On the way home, my mom thought about the man and his house. She remembered that the house had no Christmas tree, no lights, or no wreath. She remembered that there never seemed to be a Christmas celebration there. So Mom and her sister, resolved to change this. They saved their money to buy Harry a present. On the day before Christmas, Mom and her sister went into Kmart to buy Harry a card, a wreath, and a gift. They immediately went home, wrapped the gift and ran all the way to Harry’s house.

That night, Christmas Eve, my mother’s whole family went to Harry’s house and stood on his porch singing Christmas Carols. When he opened the door, they gave him the wreath, the card, and the present. They even gave him a plate of Christmas dinner, complete with a slice of pumpkin pie. He took the food and put it on his table. Then he opened the present,. It was a pair of new garden gloves. To their astonishment, he held them to his face and wept.

That year Mom learned it truly is better to give than to receive - and when we give, we cannot forget the town loner, for he needs

holiday cheer too. My prayer for this Christmas is that I do not forget the lesson my mother learned so long before.

**Prayer: God of Christmas miracles, help me to remember that it truly is better to give than to receive. Help me to be like Jesus as I seek to share the message of Christmas with others through my words and through my actions. Amen**

Mr. Charlie Watkins, Elder  
Riverside Presbyterian Church  
Jacksonville, Florida  
Advent, 2005

**Sunday, December 25, 2011** **Luke 2: 8- 20**  
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**“THE BOTH-AND DAY”**

**Luke 2: 10 “But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the City of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.’”**

What brings you the most joy, the gift or the gift-giver? That is a trick question, isn't it? Anytime someone asks us to make a choice between two correct answers that is what we're actually trying to answer—a trick question.

The reality of two correct answers is what makes today so important. Why is Christmas important? For two reasons. Here is the first: Today we celebrate God's gift of salvation. We celebrate the birth of God's Son and Mary's boy, Jesus of Nazareth.

But today is also the day we set aside each week to worship God. And those two facts—the uniqueness of Christmas Day and the regularity of the Sabbath—make today the perfect day! We gather both to worship God and celebrate His Son's birth and the gift of salvation. Today is a day set aside for experiencing great joy.

Here is the second reason Christmas is so important: It is God, the Gift-giver. Our worship is always directed to God. But today

we celebrate God's gift of Himself to the church and to everyone. On this day we celebrate that God in Christ has chosen to live with us. And God in Christ has chosen to live for us. That makes today both a time to celebrate the gift of salvation and **the** time to worship God, the Gift-giver. And that makes Christmas a both-and day. It is a day of great, inexpressible, overflowing joy.

In our scripture lesson, the angels experience that joy, and they can't keep from singing. They sing “*Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to all whom God favors!*” (Luke 2:14) Heaven's joy becomes audible for a few moments. But it still rings in our ears today. Then and now—Christmas is the both-and day of joy.

And the shepherd's follow the angel's directions and go looking for Mary, Joseph, and their baby boy. And that is how the shepherds discover Immanuel, God with us. They find God the Gift-giver wrapped both in flesh and ordinary cloth.

And when they do, this is what happens: The shepherds can't keep from singing. They “*return, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*” (Luke 2:20) Both the angels and the shepherds sing God's praises. It is heaven and earth united in God's praise. Praise the Lord! It is Christmas—The both-and day of great joy.

**Prayer: Good and gracious God, we give You all of our thanks and praise for the gift of this day, the gift of Your Son, the gift of Yourself, and the gift of salvation. Help us to praise You as we should - not only on this day of days but forever. Help us to live as Your beloved children and Your Son's disciples by enacting Your grace and continuing His ministry. We ask this in Christ's name and for His sake. Amen.**

Dr. Steve Frazier, Pastor  
First Presbyterian Church  
Fairbury, Nebraska  
Advent, 2011