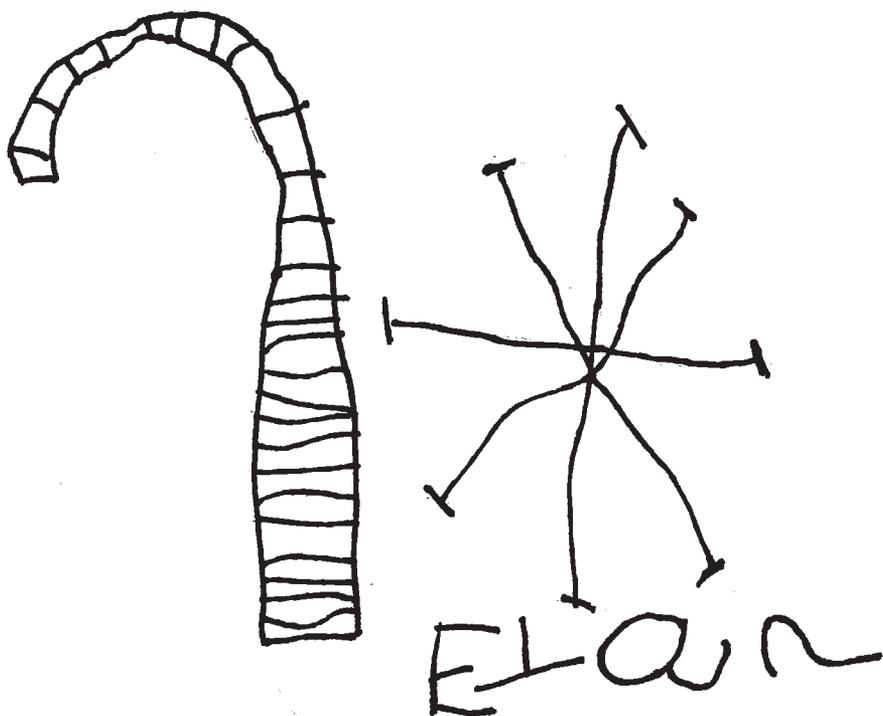


2017 Advent Devotional



Thanks be to God
for his indescribable gift!
2 Corinthians 9:15



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

Isaiah 9:6

ADVENT...a time of waiting. Waiting for what? For whom? Waiting for Jesus. God stepped out of heaven and became a vulnerable, breakable baby to push back the darkness of the world and call us out of the darkness into an unfathomable light. God would become skin, muscle, and bone and live among humanity.

But we also wait for Jesus in other ways, at other times. We wait for him to show himself, small and mild, in the situations of our daily lives. We wait for him to show himself, wild and magnificent in the beauties of the world he breathed into existence. We wait for Jesus to come again, to break the sky with glory and grace and to shout, “The strife is o’er, the battle’s won!”

These Advent days are “set aside” for us to “turn aside”... to pull away a bit from the noise and busyness of Christmas as it’s celebrated in this crazy, hectic culture in which we live.

So for each of these Advent days, including Christmas Day, there will be a brief devotional, written by a friend or member of St. John’s Christian Church. Our hope is that you relish the words, appreciate the message and maybe see a fresh and marvelous approach to Christmas. May you grasp the real meaning of this Advent season and be blessed by the words we share.

A special thank you to all the writers! Your time, thoughts, words and heart will bless each reader as the Advent season unfolds. And a very special thank you to the creators of the cover artwork for this year’s devotional, Emma, Ethan and Eyan Krukowski!

Sunday, December 3rd...

Advent season is traditionally defined as the first season of the Christian church year, leading up to Christmas. We prepare our hearts and homes to celebrate the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. One definition I read said the noun “advent” is used for the introduction of something important or the arrival that has been awaited (especially of something momentous).

We celebrate the advent of many other milestones in our life with preparation and excitement. Some examples are your first car, graduation from high school or college, marriage, the birth of a child or retirement. They all come and go and we start looking to the next big adventure. If we treat Advent this way and pack our thoughts, feelings and preparations away with the decorations only to be taken out of the box next year, aren't we missing something?

It is easy to get into the mood at Christmas time. All around us are reminders of the birth of Jesus. The Bible teaches us to always be ready as in 2 Timothy 4:2 “Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season.” To me this not only means to be ready to serve God in any situation, it also means to be prepared for his return at any time. We can stretch it to mean don't only celebrate Advent in the weeks before Christmas, but all year long. That way we will be ready.

Christians throughout history have tried to pinpoint the time of his return, but no one knows, only the Father. 2 Peter 3:4 says: “They will say, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.”” We don't want to get caught in this thinking and be unprepared when he returns to take us home. As we celebrate the season of Advent that leads up to the birth of our Savior, let us also keep the spirit of Advent alive in our hearts all the time as we anticipate and prepare for His glorious return.

Submitted by Sue Buehrer

Monday, December 4th...

Advent... the arrival of a notable person, thing or event. Simple definition. Life application is not quite so simple. The life change when my first son arrived was significant. The purchase of the house and all the responsibilities that went with that could not be foreseen. The cancer diagnosis after 63 years of perfect health. Major event! The constant throughout these advents was Jesus, the greatest advent of all. He came to make the rough ways smooth, the impossible possible, a bright light in a dark world. When the world is falling apart, all I have to do is reach out and touch the hand of the One who makes all things right, in His time. The celebration of the arrival of Baby Jesus is my yearly reminder. It gets better every year as His next Advent draws closure, when ALL other persons, things and events fade away and He makes all things new, everything PERFECT!

Hallelujah, what a Savior! Merry Christmas.

Submitted by Annie Foote

Tuesday, December 5th...

Advent Devotional:

Advent is a time of anticipation, waiting, surprises and hope. There are lights, candies, decorations... that bring sparkle and warm feelings. It is such an exciting time of the year as we prepare to celebrate Christ's quiet, simple birth in a world that is anything but simple and quiet.

God had a perfect plan for the world in His sending of His son Jesus. He understood that we needed an all powerful and mighty king, but one that was also gentle. A demanding king that expects obedience, but one that also forgives freely. A king above all others, but one that is also humble. A king that loves us so much that He would actually die for us.

It is easy to feel that our world is spiraling out of control. While anticipating Christ's birth this advent season, remember that he was born so long ago in a stable as part of a perfect plan and that **HE IS IN COMPLETE CONTROL**. He is the king, the everything that we need. What a perfect gift, from a God who loves us beyond measure.

Submitted by JoAnn Short

Wednesday, December 6th...

Do you know what your name means? Well, there was once a man, Isaiah, and his name meant “God to the rescue!” It was the perfect name for Isaiah because God had a very special job for Isaiah. Isaiah’s job was to listen to God, and then tell people what God said. This was God’s message to Isaiah: “You are all wandering away from me, like sheep in an open field. And now you’re lost. You can’t find your way back on your own and I just can’t stop loving you. So I am sending you a Shepherd to look after you and love you ... a shepherd to carry you home to me. A little baby will be born. His mother will be a young unmarried girl. The baby’s name will be Emmanuel, which means “God has come to live with us.” Someone is going to come and rescue you! But he won’t be anyone you would expect. He will be a King! But he won’t live in a palace. He won’t have wealth. He will be poor. He will be a Servant. But this King will heal the whole world...”

Unbelievable!

From Isaiah 9, 11, 40, 50, 53, 55, 60

Thursday, December 7th...

Advent: An Eternal Perspective

Jesus came as an infant, a person, much like any one of us. He freely chose to lay aside His sovereign robe of majesty to take on the shabby robe of humankind. Though sinless, He experienced what it felt like to cry, to laugh and to suffer distress. He felt the invasion of rejection and the hurt of loneliness. He knew there would be periods when He felt disliked, rejected and even hated. He could have chosen any number of paths, but He chose to come as a baby. All authority was His to command. Angels were waiting to fulfill His every request. Yet He became a servant so that He might embrace the hope of God. And except for a choir of angels singing to a band of misfit shepherds, His first appearing almost went unrecognized. It was not much of a birth announcement for the King of kings and Lord of lords. He slipped into the midst of humanity with barely a ripple in the turbulence of Bethlehem. However, when He comes back, He will come as the returning Lord and ruling King. His first coming provided the way to salvation. His second coming will be to set up His kingdom.

Submitted by Alice Tedrow

Friday, December 8th...

Christmas at St. John's

The Christmas season at St. John's Christian Church is always a very special one. We begin with the first Sunday in Advent, as we prepare for the birth of the Christ Child. Families within our church participate in the lighting of the first Advent candle, and the tradition continues each Sunday, until the lighting of the Christ candle on Christmas Eve. How good it is to see families unite as they bear witness to the truth of Jesus, the Christ.

The second Sunday in December at St. John's is celebrated through the always inspiring "Sermon in Music." Individuals and groups demonstrate their God given talents as they share music and readings that honor God's presence on earth. It is no less than amazing to experience this "Sermon in Music."

The candlelight Christmas Eve service is perhaps the most inspiring one of all Christmas worship at St. John's. As the service ends, the lights are extinguished, and our candles are lit. Our candles are raised higher with each verse, as we all sing the hymn "Silent Night" together. The emotional bond shared at that moment is to be treasured.

Finally, an informal service on Christmas Day itself provides the perfect means to sing a few hymns, and to reflect upon the joys of the season.

We welcome all to Christmas at St. John's. Come, and celebrate the birth of Christ with us!

Submitted by Jim Redd

Saturday, December 9th...

Everything was ready. The moment God had been waiting for was here at last!

God was coming to help his people, just as he promised in the very beginning.

But how would he come? What would he be like? What would he do?

Mountains bowed down. Seas roared. Trees clapped their hands. The earth held its breath. As silent as snow falling, he came. When no one was looking, in the darkness, a baby would arrive. One morning, a young girl was minding her own business when, suddenly, a great warrior of light appeared- right there, before her. An angel, Gabriel, appeared with a special message from heaven. Mary was frightened...who wouldn't be??? "You don't need to be afraid," Gabriel said. "God is very pleased with you! Mary, you are going to have a baby...a little boy. You will call him Jesus. He is God's own Son. He's the One! He's the Rescuer!" The God who flung planets into space and kept them whirling around, the God who made the universe with just a word, the one who could do anything at all – was making himself small and coming down... as a baby. **Unbelievable!**

From Luke 1-2

Sunday, December 10th...

Unbelievable! Advent and Christmas are here again! I ask myself, “Is it going to be a time of expectation, hope and reflection, or a season of hustle and bustle that we almost forget the real reason for celebration?” My way of starting the Advent season is taking time and going to North Carolina to work at Operation Christmas Child. Should I be home decorating, buying presents, baking, etc...probably!

While I am there working, the blessings I receive are too many to count. I meet many new people and hear countless stories of their lives and how they celebrate the season. As I am looking through and praying over the boxes, I think about whose hands this box will eventually find. I also think that if we gave these boxes to our own children, they would think we didn't love them...materialism! We hear stories from people who have received these boxes and how God impacts their lives. One of my favorite stories is about a child whose box only contained a picture and a letter in it. The child's father was a bit upset that his child didn't receive toys, candy, caps, etc., like many of the other boxes. But guess what the letter entailed...a new house for the family! Another story is of a little girl who prayed for shoes. When she opened her box, she found new shoes...too big, but stuffing them with paper solved the problem!

During the week in Charlotte, Christmas is put into perspective for me. As we come into this season of hope and expectation, my hope is that we remember how privileged we are to live in a country of amazing blessings! When I ask myself, “What does this season really mean to me,” the answer is easy – love and hope. One of my favorite verses is “Be still and know that I am God.” My prayer is that we take time for Jesus in this busy season of Advent. Merry Christmas!

Submitted by Judy Sears

Monday, December 11th...

“Jesus replied, “Go back and tell John what you hear and see; the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the Good News is preached to the poor.” ”
Matthew 11:4-5

After 20 years of teaching, and prior training in Spanish, it dawned on me that I was losing my language ability. I had some time off in the summers so I began to look for opportunities for using and improving my Spanish. I found a group of doctors called Medical Missions International (MMI) who would go to Peru for 2 weeks every summer taking medical help to the rural regions. They needed translators so I volunteered.

On one medical mission an elderly Peruvian woman was brought to us. She had what looked like an abscess on her right temple and said she could not see in that eye. The doctor said it looked like a benign tumor behind her right eye. He told me to tell her that the tumor was not life threatening but was inoperable, and she would remain blind in that eye. After I told her she gave a little smile. Dr. Wayne was puzzled and doubted if she had understood my translation and how grave her condition really was. “Tell her again,” he said, “she obviously doesn’t understand the seriousness of my diagnosis!” I told her again and she said, “I understand, but the doctor does not know my story.”

“Several years ago I was going blind in both eyes. I could see only dark shadows and had to be led around by others. Someone from my village told me a group of doctors were coming to the capital city to hold a free vision clinic. They volunteered to take me by bus from my village to Lima. At the clinic a simple eye exam confirmed that I had extreme cataracts covering both eyes rendering me essentially blind.

He said the procedure to restore my sight was a simple one but without it I would go totally blind. There was no way I could afford even a simple procedure. The doctor told me that soon a group of ophthalmologists would be coming to Lima to perform eye surgeries and asked if I would like an appointment. He said there would be no cost for the operation. My dear friend promised she would help get me to the appointment and she would even pay for my bus ticket. Several months later I had the procedure that restored vision in both eyes. I once was blind but now I can see! I'm not upset about the loss of vision in my right eye. I still have the vision in my left eye which is enough of a miracle for me."

The miracle was not the simple surgical procedure. The greater "miracle" was all the details that were required so that this lady and the surgical team from 6,000 miles away could inhabit the same space and time for the 20 minute procedure to occur. The woman smiled because she had already received her miracle.

What's the moral to this story for you and me? Open your eyes to those who cross your path. Do they need what you can provide? Has God placed them in your way so that you can be part of their "miracle?" Will you do what you can to help them?

Prayer: Lord, I thank you for all the blessings I have received from You. Grant me the sensitivity to the leading of the Holy Spirit, so that as You place people in my path who need what I can provide, I can freely give it... Let me be a part of Your blessing to them through me. In the Name of Jesus, I pray. Amen.

Submitted by Dan Light

Tuesday, December 12th...

Nine months later, the time was near for Mary's baby to be born. Due to the census, Mary and Joseph had to travel to Bethlehem to pay taxes. But when they reached the little town, they found every room was full. Every bed was taken. "Go away!" the innkeepers told them. "There isn't any place for you." Where would they stay? Mary's baby was coming soon! They couldn't find anywhere except an old, tumbledown stable. So they stayed where the cows and the donkeys and horses lived. And there, in the stable, amongst the sheep and the donkeys and the cows, in the quiet of the night, God gave the world his wonderful gift... the baby that would change the world. His baby Son. Mary and Joseph wrapped him to keep him warm. They made a soft bed of straw and used the animals' feeding trough as his cradle. And they gazed in wonder at God's Great Gift, wrapped in swaddling clothes, and lying in a manger. Mary and Joseph named him Jesus, "Emmanuel"— which means "God has come to live with us"...because of course, he had. **Unbelievable!**

From Luke 2

Wednesday, December 13th...

I love Christmas! I love decorating for the season, the parties, family gatherings, baking, the music, and everything that goes with the holiday. It's "the most wonderful time of the year" as the song goes. Yes, it's a time of the year filled with all these activities, yet we don't take time to spend with Jesus, who is the reason we celebrate. We're so busy that we neglect our time in the Word, we don't take time in prayer, for spending time with the Lord. In our busyness we have no room to fellowship with the one whose birthday we're celebrating. There was "no room" for Mary and Joseph at the inn at Bethlehem so our Savior was born in a stable. That's often true in our own lives. We're so busy we don't have room for Him. There's an old hymn we use to sing that says it all, "Have you any room for Jesus? He who bore your load of sin. As He knocks and asks admission, Will you let the Savior in? Room for Jesus, King of Glory, Hasten now His Word obey. Swing the hearts door widely open, Bid Him enter while He may."

Revelations 3:20 "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person and He with me." What an invitation! He wants to be part of our lives, to have fellowship with us, to give us the abundant life He promised. Make room for the Savior today. It's a life worth living!

Submitted by Mary Ellen Johnson

Thursday, December 14th...

Adjusting, Stubbornly, To A Changing World

Jeremiah 29:11 “I alone know the plans I have for you, plans to bring you prosperity and not disaster, plans to bring about the future you hope for.”

Like many others, I hate change. I like to have my life neat, tidy, and familiar. So it should be no surprise that I resist all of the latest gadgets, fads and fashions. I am now in my 60's and I look pretty much the same as I did in high school.

The first major lifestyle advance I recall dragging my heels on was early in my first marriage. To my wife's chagrin, I insisted our gas-fired cook stove and oven was all we needed to prepare our food. By Christmas I relented and surprised her with a microwave oven.

Then came the cell phone. I wouldn't have one. But my employer provided me with one anyway. Now it is figuratively attached to my hip. Because of that cell phone I felt more at ease when my first child was due and I was opening up new accounts in unfamiliar territory. It gave my wife a means to contact me should a hospital run become necessary during working hours. That cell phone also proved to be invaluable in staying in touch with the nurses who cared for my mother while she was in an assisted care facility, and then a nursing home.

Next came the computer age. I wanted nothing to do with these exasperating devices. Needless to say, I now use them daily at work and at home.

Did I mention that I also hate to travel? Yet I just recently returned from a solo trip to the far side of the earth to meet up with the woman who is now my fiancée. You guessed it, I met her on the Internet even though I declared that I'd NEVER use social media.

I keep thumbing my nose at new things and fads as my way to save money, or to keep my life as simple as possible. But I worry too much. In the end I have latched onto all of these innovations and they have literally transformed my life. The point is, I have to learn to trust God and to remember that HE is ALWAYS by my side no matter what kinds of newfangled things come along. He always wants the best for me. He wants the best for each one of us.

I also draw solace in the following verses; Philippians 4:6-8, James 1:6.

Submitted by Dean Buckenmeyer

Friday, December 15th...

That same night, in amongst the other stars, suddenly a bright new star appeared!

Of all the stars in the dark vaulted heavens, this one shone clearer, brighter, more intense. It blazed in the night and made the other stars look pale beside it. God put it there when his baby Son was born- to be like a spotlight... lighting up the darkness, showing people the way to him. You see, God was like a proud Father - He couldn't keep the good news to himself. He had been waiting all these long years for this very moment, and now he wanted to tell everyone. So God pulled out all the stops. He'd sent an angel to tell Mary the good news. He'd put a special star in the sky to show where his son was. And now he was going to send a big choir of angels to sing his joyful song to the world. **Unbelievable!**

From Luke 2

Saturday, December 16th...

Are you tuned in? Are you aware? Are you aware of God's presence? Do you stop and savor those moments you are sure of God's presence? "The moments" can be early in the morning when the earth is waking up or late at night when shadows are scary or when beautiful stars twinkle above. Any time is a good time for "the moments" you are aware God Is here.

Any place will do! Floating on the lake on a hot summer day, at the Little League World Series with our grandkids, at your kitchen counter reading daily scripture and listening to great music, or waking up in the middle of the night with the exact words in your head that you need to share. The places are random, but the presence of God is sure.

We seem to be more aware of "the moments" at Christmas time. All our senses are heightened by the spirit of the season. Everything twinkles with bright colors while beautiful carols play in the background. The pine tree's scent and the aroma of candles are heavenly. Everyone is looking for "the moments" to make the season wonderful.

We often find "the moments" while singing Silent Night at the Candlelight Service, watching our loved ones open their gifts, caroling on a snowy night, or rereading the story of the precious baby Jesus' birth. "The moments" we cherish forever.

During this Christmas season stop and be aware of God's presence. Be aware of "the moments." You will find that all "the moments" melt together into every minute of every day of your life. He is standing beside you, walking with you down life's path and most of all loving you like no one else can...every "moment" of your life and forever...He is in "the moment!"

Psalm 46:10 "Be still and know that I am God."

Submitted by Deb Kauffman

Sunday, December 17th...

Advent time is truly one of my favorite times of the year. It has crossed my mind however ... shouldn't I strive to live my life preparing for Christ. A dear friend shared Isaiah 43 from The Message with me: "But now, God's Message, the God who made you in the first place, insert your name, the One who got you started: Don't be afraid, I've redeemed you. I've called your name. You're mine. When you're in over your head, I'll be there with you. When you're in rough waters, you will not go down. When you're between a rock and a hard place, it won't be a dead end— Because I am God, your personal God, The Holy of Israel, your Savior. I paid a huge price for you: That's how much you mean to me! That's how much I love you! I'd sell off the whole world to get you back, trade the creation just for you."

This verse was a life saver for me. In black and white, I read how much Jesus Christ loved me, and how much I meant to Him. It made me want to know more, read more, grow more, and I did. In His words, I read other verses, such as "He died for me knowing I was a sinner." He knew I wasn't perfect, he wasn't surprised, and He still chose me. There were times in my life that I didn't make the best decisions. In His words, I found comfort. I found a real relationship. I found that just because I had a bad day, it wasn't a bad life. Every morning was a do-over. I was looking at my yesterdays so much, that I was missing my todays. That love, grace, and forgiveness is for all of us. Accept Him, accept His gifts. I promise you, you won't be sorry. Experience the Christmas miracle not only on Christmas Day, but choose to have a Christmas life. I end this on a little verse that we keep on our family picture. Philippians 4:19 "God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus." With that is the statement: God is bigger than any problem we face, stronger than any doubt we can imagine. Amen. Thank you for letting me share with you.

Submitted by Angie Neuenschwander

Monday, December 18th...

On that special night, did God's splendid choir sing in a fancy concert hall? A palace perhaps? **SURPRISE!** God sent his choir to a little hillside, outside a little town, in the middle of the night. He sent all those angels to sing for a raggedy old bunch of shepherds watching their sheep outside Bethlehem. In those days people considered shepherds nobodies, just scruffy old riff-raff. But God must have thought otherwise because they're the ones he chose to first tell the good news. That night some shepherds were out in the open fields, warming themselves by a campfire, when suddenly the sheep darted. They were frightened by something. The olive trees rustled. What was that? There was suddenly a huge warrior of light, blazing in the darkness. "Don't be afraid! I've come to bring you happy news for everyone everywhere. Today in David's town, in Bethlehem, God's Son has been born! You can go and see him. He is sleeping in a manger." Without warning, troops and troops of angels appeared singing a beautiful song: "Glory to God!" Then as quickly as they appeared, the angels left. The shepherds stamped out their fire, left their sheep, raced down the grassy hill, through the gates of Bethlehem, down the narrow cobble streets, through a courtyard, down some steps, past an inn, around a corner, until, at last, they reached... a tumbledown stable. They caught their breath. Then quietly, they tiptoed inside. Here he was... Heaven's Son. The Maker of the Stars. A baby sleeping in his mother's arms. **Unbelievable!**

From Luke 2

Tuesday, December 19th...

Isaiah 53:7-9 “He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he never said a word. He was brought as a lamb to the slaughter; and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he stood silent before the ones condemning him. From prison and trial they led him away to his death. But who among the people of that day realized it was their sins that he was dying for –that he was suffering their punishment? He was buried like a criminal in a rich man’ grave; but he had done no wrong, and had never spoken an evil word.”

During Advent we celebrate the birth of the child, our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a time of joy, thinking of others, and remembering the child who came to earth welcomed by shepherds and wise men, but also hunted by the government of the day. The people of that time did not know what was ahead, but we know the rest of the story.

We have been reading *The Book of Mysteries* by Jonathan Cahn as part of our devotions. In Isaiah 53:8, the verse in the original Hebrew reads “in His deaths.” Cahn writes, “Remember, in Hebrew, when a word should be singular, but is rendered plural, it is often a sign that the reality behind the word is so unique, so intense, so extreme, or so colossal that the word alone cannot contain it. In other words, the death of the Messiah is such a unique reality, such an extreme reality, and such a colossal reality that the word death cannot even begin to approach it.” His death also encompassed the deaths of all human beings. His death on the cross included my death. He died that I might live.

Lord, you are the baby I welcome into this world this season, and you are my Savior that I thank for the forgiveness of my sins and for eternal life. Thank you, Father, for sending your Son. Thank you, Jesus, for giving yourself for me. Thank you, Holy Spirit, for your Presence in my heart to lead, guide and direct me in this life and the next. Amen.

Submitted by Norma Fish

Wednesday, December 20th...

Luke 2:15; NIV “When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” ”

1 Peter 5:2; MSG “... Here’s my concern: that you care for God’s flock with all the diligence of a shepherd. Not because you have to, but because you want to please God. Not calculating what you can get out of it, but acting spontaneously. Not bossily telling others what to do, but tenderly showing them the way.”

I’ve been thinking about the shepherds lately. They dropped everything to head to see the Messiah after the angels told them of the Great News. Their plans changed. They knew they had to go.

As my family embarks on a journey we didn’t have in ‘our plans’ this Advent season, we, like the shepherds, are dropping what we thought was important to us, to tend to ‘one of our sheep.’

May God show us places that we can tenderly serve Him this Advent season, whether that is in our own community, or a cancer hospital half way across the state

Submitted by Maggs Enderle

Thursday, December 21st...

Far away, in the East, three clever men saw the very same star. The star that God had put in the sky when Jesus was born. They knew it was a sign. A baby king had been born! They had been waiting and watching for this star. At dawn, they packed up their camels. They loaded their most precious treasures: frankincense, gold, and myrrh. The three Wise Men set off on their camels ... across endless deserts ... up steep, steep mountains ... down into deep, deep valleys ... through raging rivers ... over grassy plains ... night and day, day and night, for hours that turned into days, that turned into weeks, that turned into months, until, at last, they reached Jerusalem. Jerusalem was an important city so they stopped at the most likely place to ask directions to the baby ... the palace. They went to see King Herod. Surely he'd know where this baby was. But he didn't. In fact, he didn't like the sound of a new king - it made him furious! He didn't want anyone to be king, except him. But Herod's advisors told the three Wise Men what was written in their books - what God has said about the baby king: "Go to Bethlehem. That's where you'll find him." Bethlehem? Bethlehem was a little, nothing town! A king born in Bethlehem? **Unbelievable!**

From Matthew 2

Friday, December 22nd...

...they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures... Matthew 2:11

One of my favorite stories is about a missionary teaching in Africa. Before Christmas, he had been telling his African students how Christians, as an expression of their joy, gave each other presents on Christ's birthday. On Christmas morning, one of the Africans brought the missionary a seashell of lustrous beauty. When asked where he had discovered such an extraordinary shell, the young man said he had walked many miles to a certain bay, the only spot where such shells could be found. "I think it was wonderful of you to travel so far to get this lovely gift for me," the teacher exclaimed. His eyes brightening, the African answered, "Long walk, part of gift." It is true, Christmas is an effort for all of us, but I truly believe that the holiday is made more meaningful, more memorable, because of that effort.

Prayer: Father, when things get so hectic and we want to say, "It's too much...it's not worth the effort," remind us of the "long walk," and the lovely gift at the end. Amen.

Submitted by Nancy Ries

Saturday, December 23rd...

Suddenly the star they has seen in the East started moving again, showing them the way. So the three Wise Men followed the star until it stopped right over ... a little house. But wait ... it wasn't a palace. And there weren't any guards. Or servants. Or flags. Or red carpets. Or trumpets. Or anything. Did they get it wrong? Or was this what God meant? There they found him. The baby King. The three men knelt before the little King. They took off their rich royal turbans and gleaming golden crowns. They bowed their noble heads to the ground and gave their sparkling treasures. The journey that had begun so many centuries before had led three Wise Men here, to a little town, to a little house, to a little child ... to the King God had promised David all those years before. But this child was a new kind of king. Though he was the Mighty God, he had become a helpless baby. **Unbelievable!**

From Matthew 2

Sunday, December 24th...

Isaiah 38: 1-8

The Lord says, “I have heard your prayers and have seen your tears.”

It was Christmas Eve and Robert and I had just arrived home from the candlelight service at church. The program and music had lifted our spirits. Even Lucky (our dog) was in good spirits as we came into the house. I took her outside. Lucky went checking out the rabbit tracks. I noticed how clear the sky was, the stars were shining at their best and the air was cool and crisp. There were no sounds of the world, just peaceful silence. I wondered if Mary and Joseph had a night just like this when they were riding into Bethlehem. They both would have been a little anxious not knowing what the next few days would bring. I would guess they both said prayers along their long ride.

I left Lucky outside to enjoy her hunt. Sometime later I went out to bring her in but she was no where to be found in our yard. I checked around the neighborhood with no luck in finding her. I was getting worried; she never wandered that far from home. Now I was getting scared. Did she get hurt? My thoughts were, “Oh, please, Lord, don’t let anything happen to her...not on Christmas Eve!” December for many years had not been our favorite month. Some kind of difficult circumstance always seemed to put a damper on the joy of Christmas. I went one more time up and down the streets looking...when suddenly I saw something coming from the field across the street. It was Lucky, running toward me, bouncing through the snow without a care in the world, tail wagging, happy to see me. As I fell down to give her a big hug, I thanked God for hearing my prayer that brought Lucky home safely. Then a thought came to me...the Lord did hear all my prayers over the many Decembers of difficult times. When I look back, the answers actually turned out to be great blessings!

“I took refuge in the shadows of God’s wings until the disaster has passed.” Psalm 57:1

Submitted by Carol DeVries

Monday, December 25th...

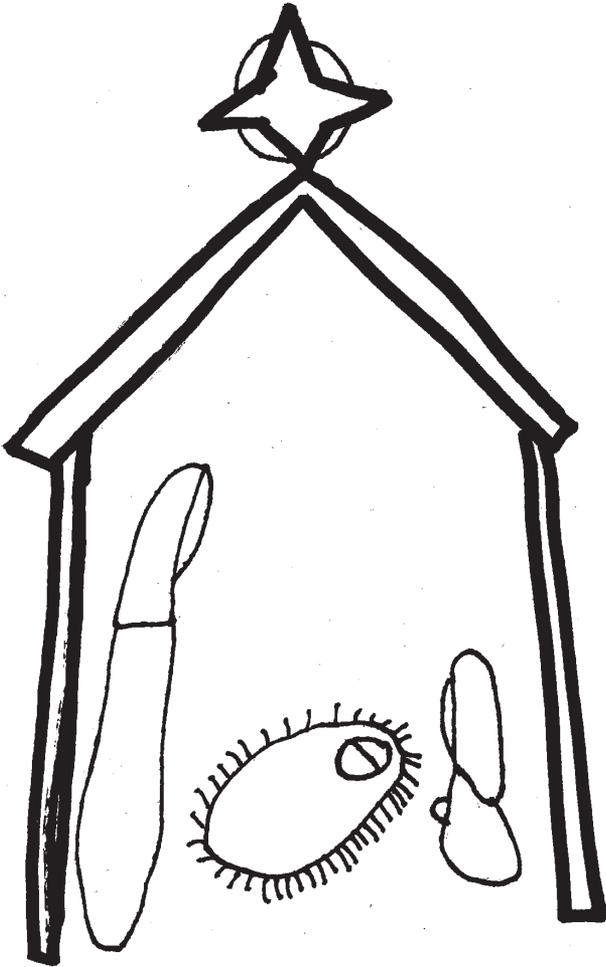
I specifically remember one Christmas morning when I was about 4 years old. As usual, we kids were up at the crack of dawn, eager to open the brightly decorated presents under the tree. My parents were not wealthy people, so gifts were minimum, but we really didn't care. We had plenty of food, a warm house, clothes to wear – all our basic needs were met. My sister, brothers and I excitedly opened our gifts...and to tell you the truth, I don't really remember what was actually in those packages. Then my Mom enthusiastically exclaimed, "You missed some presents!" More gifts??? Where??? We fervently searched under the tree one more time...nothing! My Mom was laughing and enjoying our search undertaking! Finally she shouted, "Up! Look up!" Hanging from the highest branches, among the lights and decorations, hung beautiful baby doll clothes, made lovingly by my Mom's own hands. I remember feeling mesmerized! As we hastily bustle getting ready for Christmas, do we take time to search and "look up?" Look up and see the wonder of God. Look up and thank the One who we celebrate. Look up and imagine the brightest star and the angels proclaiming, "Glory!" to the awestruck shepherds. Jesus is the gift that continually gives – bounteously, with no strings attached... unconditional love – that's what was lying in the manger on that Holy night...love and then more love. Search no more... Look up and celebrate the Blessed One, the child who changed the world forever!

"Look at the night skies: Who do you think made all this? Who marches this army of stars out each night, counts them off, calls each by name – so magnificent! So powerful! – and never overlooks a single one!" Isaiah 40:26

Submitted by Nancy Rupp

So they hurried off and
found Mary and Joseph, and
the baby, who was lying in
the manger.

Luke 2:16



Ethan