

What are you longing for?

Our lives are a complicated mixture of beauty and tragedy. And while it is perhaps too easy a temptation to focus on our immediate circumstances, 2017 has had both in abundance.

Consider our own congregational life. We've celebrated the dedication of two precious little boys and mourned the passing of some much-beloved, faithful church members. We've rejoiced at baptisms and weddings and walked along side some members struggling with significant health concerns. We've helped build a Habitat for Humanity home in NW Roanoke and provided clean-up buckets for persons whose homes have been destroyed in natural disasters.

Or, consider the world. 2017 brought devastating hurricanes, fiery infernos, and semi-automatic slaughter. In the midst of that, our church property was filled with the sounds of children playing during Camp Bethel's traveling Day Camp; soul-inspiring choral melodies, complex bell-choir chords, and warm organ, piano and ensemble accompaniment filled our sanctuary; and joy-filled conversation—which isn't quickly quieted when it's time to pray, worship, or eat—was our constant companion.



It's little wonder that we feel like our heads and hearts are on a swivel, jerking back and forth from heart-warming beauty to soul-crushing disaster. In these times, Advent may be the thing we most need. Christmas is certainly what we want, but Advent is what we need.

The Advent texts and hymns that inspire the devotional writing in this booklet—especially the Old Testament passages—can be a real challenge. Prophets like Jeremiah, Micah, and John the Baptist were not out to win popularity contests. They give strong and consistent testimony that the world has gone off course. Their messages might be popular when delivered to someone else, but—to our great dismay—they inevitably circle back and land on our doorstep, demanding to be let inside when we would much rather remain comfortable in our own preconceptions and prejudices, undisturbed by facts which don't fit our worldview.

And yet when we slow down, we come to the inevitable (and difficult) realization that these crusty old prophets might actually be right. We look out our windows, or read our favorite Twitter feeds, and see that in the midst of some very real and undeniable beauty, there simultaneously exists a fair amount of disaster that defies an easy explanation or a quick fix. Maybe the best gift that any of us could receive this Advent is to get in touch with our inner longings and be motivated by that which is faithful and beautiful so that we may understand and transform that which is tragic and ugly. ***What are you longing for?***

My prayer is that these daily Bible and devotional readings will be one practice our congregation shares together as we follow Jesus in the time and place we call home.

For the readings each Sunday, you'll find both a brief description of a hymn and a prayer, each of which will be used in that Sunday's worship. Christmas Day has two entries; one with a hymn and a prayer (that you might use at your family's Christmas dinner) and a separate

devotional entry. On rest of the days, you'll find devotional writing that offers some theological and personal reflections on the stated text. Some of these devotions will stir up sentimental memories of Christmases past. Some will force you to think—to reach for your Bible and ponder a text at a new, and perhaps deeper, level. A few might make you uncomfortable. Whichever the case, enjoy the memories of Christmases past and accept the challenge of those who push us beyond our comfort zones.

Finally, a few acknowledgments are in order. I offer my sincere thank you to each one who wrote for this project—especially those who are not members of our congregation, but happily said “Yes!” when I called and asked you to write. Michael Craighead designed our cover and Emily Harvey created the word art for each of the hymn texts. Your gifts with pen and pencil enrich the beauty of the words and prayers included within. Carol Elmore researched the hymns included each Sunday for some interesting and helpful information behind the texts and the tunes, and I wrote prayers that accompany those.

Pastor Tim

December 3-9



December 3, 2017
First Sunday of Advent

While we are waiting, come
Hymn # 1032, Hymnal Supplement

Waiting is hard. This hymn begs for the Savior to not simply come, but to come quickly! The music's dissonance reflects what goes on inside of us when we have to wait, anticipate, or even wonder if "it" will ever happen. The music (written by Don Cason) and text are also congruent as the ending chord resolves, as we are assured that "Jesus, our Lord, Emmanuel" will indeed come.

The hymn writer, Claire Cloninger (born 1942) is a Dove Award recipient, and has written songs for Amy Grant and Sandy Patti.

Prayer

We remember days, all-powerful, all-knowing God, when things seemed simpler. We marked off December days on our Advent calendars, waiting for that special morning when there would be presents under the Christmas tree, and that day would be filled with gifts, and family, and food.

Now we know more. Our eyes have been opened to the ugliness of the world that exists right alongside the beauty. Somedays you seem more distant to us than you once did.

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence, and that we would experience you like we once did, when you did awesome deeds that we did not expect.

We confess that the distance we feel from you is of our own doing. Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter. Do not remember our iniquity forever. Forgive us, that we might be restored to your presence and enjoy you again.

While we are waiting, come, Lord Jesus. Come. Amen.

December 4
*An Incredible Feeling of
Peace*
Isaiah 2:1-5

*He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate
for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into
plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation
shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they
learn war any more (Isaiah 2:4)*

I grew up in the Church of the Brethren but when I became a teenager I only went occasionally and when I married and moved away I stopped going all together. I still believed that Jesus died for my sins but I put God behind my work and my family.

After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, I felt that I should start attending again. There was a sense that God was pulling me back to church.

I went to several churches, and most of them were so big that no one even knew that I was a visitor and no one even spoke to me. They were not Brethren churches.

I asked my family about Brethren churches close by and they said "Try Oak Grove." When I went to Oak Grove several people spoke to me and made me feel welcome.

My husband was very upset about my going back to church. Most of my family is very religious and he was afraid that I would "be at church every time they opened the doors" and would want him to go with me. Although Steve believes in God and is a good man, he has a problem with churches and religion.

He was making negative comments all the time and it was definitely causing problems between us as a couple.

There was a special assignment for Sunday School one Sunday to take a walk outside, enjoy nature and take a problem to the Lord. I took my question to Him. "Was I going to have to choose between my husband and my Savior?"

I walked and prayed and as I returned to my car a feeling of complete peace came over me. It was like someone was hugging my whole body from my head to my toes. It was the most incredible feeling I have ever had. I just knew that everything was going to work out.

My husband and I talked and discussed my fears and well as his. We made some changes in our attitudes and over time it has worked out.

Emily Nelson

December 5
Life in-between
Isaiah 11:1-10

*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots (Isaiah 11:1)*

Hope was in short supply when Isaiah spoke to the people of Judah. Assyria had already conquered Israel, and though its armies had not overrun Judah, Judah had previously been its vassal, and the threat of attack was quite real. The people lived in turmoil. Would things get any better when they seemed so bleak? Did Yahweh remember his promises to them?

Isaiah's message to God's people was a resounding, "Yes!" He will save his people and do it in ways that are almost unbelievable. God will replace chaos with stability. The royal line of David which will appear as dead and cut off as a tree stump will provide a king like they've never seen before, one on whom the Lord's spirit rests. He will judge wisely, give justice to the poor, and all of creation will live peaceably, predator and prey alike.

It is often hard for us to live in this in-between time. Like Judah, we must rest on God's promises while the world seems to descend into chaos, and yet we are so very fortunate to live on this side of the Messiah's resurrection. We have seen his power in our lives and know his wisdom and love, and we continue to wait for our king's return and for new creation. While we wait, we live as kingdom people, living under the rule of our king and savior. We show the world the love and wisdom which Christ has shown us, trusting in his promise to return, and remembering Isaiah's words of comfort and hope.

Gina Wright Hawkins

December 6
News
Isaiah 40:1-9

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" (Isaiah 40:9)

News.

What thoughts or emotions does this word create in you? If you are like me, you struggle with the news. It's hard to stay up to date on every breaking story. It's hard to listen, sometimes, when you know most of what you hear will be negative and divisive.

Our news flies at us from every direction and position. Gone are the days when our sources are few and straightforward. But, what about the news we share with others? We cannot hold others accountable for news they share unless we, too, are willing to consider our own proclamations.

A voice commands, "Cry out!" Another voice wonders, "What shall I cry?" Indeed, what shall we cry? What can we proclaim to those with whom we speak? Our words which are spoken, typed, tweeted, and sung all matter. The question remains: What shall we cry?

As a church we celebrate accomplished goals, yet we long for a golden past. What shall we cry?

As a church we strive to be relevant, yet we shy from tough questions which conjure up fear and doubt. What shall we cry?

As a church we pray for peace, yet we hesitate to speak the truth in love. What shall we cry?

It was proclaimed that Mary would have a child whose reign would never end. As Mary—a young, unwed and expectant woman—entered her own season of preparation, I believe she also wondered, "What shall I cry?"

"Here is your God!" God is here encouraging our voices. God is here calling us to speak. What will we lift up? What will we proclaim from the mountain?

Tabitha H. Rudy
Interim Associate District Executive
Virlina District Church of the Brethren

December 7
Promises and Responses
Micah 5:2-5a

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days (Micah 5:2)

Many of us are from rural backgrounds which likely, even if we neglect to realize, have instilled certain biases in relating to a world undergoing rapid change. The knowledge in which we find our security seems to be in question or perhaps obsolete. Connecting to changing realities becomes difficult for some. Yet we must acknowledge the power of human innovation and realize its benefits are astounding. We might praise mankind's abilities in solving our problems; but simultaneously, we are aware that certain issues perpetually plague humankind and despite our efforts we cannot resolve these complexities.

Micah calls out the root of these complexities. In doing so, he condemns the cities where the powers who rule reside. He rails against their injustices, their illegitimate gains and abuse of the disadvantaged. He criticizes unfair governance and laments over the hypocrisy of the religiously aware in their misguided justifications. Criticisms which resonate today.

But Micah reminds us of more than just this. Though living centuries before Christ, he guides us to an answer which transcends backgrounds or biases, one which man's ingenuity might disregard. He recalls a slower time when God established covenants and walked alone through a sacrifice giving Himself to us. From a most unlikely origin but continuing within the Davidic line, Micah recounts a historic God as he foretells the coming of a Messiah. We Christians clearly recognize Christ in Micah's proclamation. We realize it is a moment in history when God literally walks among us.

We will soon celebrate this moment. As this time approaches, let us forego our biases and heed Micah's call to remember the promises and our responses to God's story; discovering continually that only living into God's proclamations will security be found – even in times of unprecedented change.

Robbie Tatum

December 8
*A life-changing
encounter*
Matthew 2:1-12

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road
(Matthew 2:12)

Having seen the new born King, the Magi changed their route and went home another way. When we see Jesus at this Yuletide season, may our lives and plans be changed because of our encounter with the manger King.

On December 8, 2017, I will be 90 years old (the Lord willing). My life has changed many times because of an encounter with the Babe of Bethlehem.

A plaque on a kitchen wall reads, "When God closes a door, He always opens a window." I have found this to be true in my life. The Psalmist says, "O God, you have taught me from my youth, and to this day I declare your wondrous works." (Psalm 71:97)

Prayer: *Lord, keep me from being discouraged by closed doors. Help me live to open windows. May we add years to our life, through Jesus, our Manger King.*

Paul White

December 9
The year of Jubilee
Isaiah 61:1-4
Luke 4:18-19

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor
(Isaiah 61:1-2a)

"Jesus began his ministry with a clear reference to the year of Jubilee. In the synagogue at Nazareth, he read these words from Isaiah: 'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor' (Isaiah 61:1-2 and Luke 4:18-19). He spoke of freedom to the prisoners and releasing the oppressed and proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor. What other year could this mean but the year of Jubilee? After proclaiming it, he went on to bring deliverance from sin, sickness and Satan to multitudes of those who were bound and afflicted. All this culminated with his own deliverance from the chains of death; and 50 days later, the deliverance of his followers from all fear on the glorious day of Pentecost. They in turn proclaimed deliverance and release to captives wherever they went" (growinggod.org.uk/year-of-jubilee.htm).



This Year of Jubilee has been declared to end in the fall of 2017. It has been a horrendous year with floods, hurricanes, tornados, fires, famine, wars and the largest increase in refugees and oppressed and prisoners that the world has ever seen. Some say that this is the beginning of the end of times. Others see this as a Jubilee time of mercy. As we come into this season of Advent, we must focus on our opportunity to atone for not paying attention to the Sabot that was given to us. On the seventh day of the week, we have been given an opportunity to rest and to meditate on God's will in our lives. It is a gift handed down through Moses to God's people.

During this 50th year of the beginning of new time, we have not only a period for reflection; we have a time to give back that which God has provided. We let the land and our lives rest. We free ourselves and others from the slavery of anxiety and striving to become rich. We free others from their burdens of oppression. We return the refugees to the land that was taken from them and restore the homes that were destroyed. We allow the poor to glean the fields freely. We cancel all debts and removed all economic greed.

Because of the gift of Jesus Christ, we have been set free this Christmas to give of our time, our talent, our resources and our love to those who have been taken captive by greed, hatred and power. In the next 49 years of time, it is up to us to reinstate the Kingdom of the Lord on Earth. Amen

Sharon Flora

December 10-16



December 10, 2017
Second Sunday of Advent

Comfort, Comfort, O My People
Hymn # 176, Hymnal: a worship book

This hymn text, chosen for the second Sunday of Advent comes out of Isaiah and reflects the grief and solace that has come to the people, soon to be out of exile. These people understand the desert! Verses 2-3 remind us to prepare for the coming of the Lord. John the Baptist's declaring "Prepare ye the way of the Lord!" is foreshadowed in the Isaiah scripture.

How do you need to prepare for the coming of the Lord? Prayer? Helping your neighbor? Forgiving someone? Being silent? "Let your hearts be true and humble, as befits his holy reign" (v. 3).

Prayer

In our neighborhoods, around the bend in the road, to those who have much, and to those who lack much, we proclaim: **Here is your God!**

On uneven ground and in the deepest valleys, to those who think they are strong and to those who know they are no more constant than grass, we proclaim: **Here is your God!**

God comes with might; **God feeds us as a shepherd feeds his flock.**

God comes with power; **God is gracious and forgives our sin.**

Take comfort, God's people, take comfort. We have no need to fear. God comes to forgive and to save.

December 11
Singing the word
Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God
(Isaiah 40:1, KJV)

It's always comforting when I come across a familiar Bible passage—familiar in another context, I mean. The words from the first verse of Isaiah 40 are etched in my mind, but not from hearing them from the pulpit or from my own appointments with the Bible over the years. At an early age and for many years thereafter, I heard my grandfather sing these words from Handel's *Messiah* along with a phonograph record at the house on Grant Street on Christmas Eve. Sometimes, the adult choir at church was sufficiently talented enough to perform several pieces from the *Messiah* during Advent, and "Boppa" would sing all the tenor solos. He was "in his element," it appeared to me. I probably didn't realize or understand when I was young that Handel didn't "make up" these words but "borrowed" them from the Old Testament book of Isaiah. (I think that when I did discover that fact, I thought it was pretty neat.)

Handel must have thought these words were particularly meaningful because they're the first words you hear after the Overture. Other familiar texts (to many of us) come from verses 4 (*Every valley shall be exalted...*), 5 (*And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed...*), 9 (*O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion...*), and 11 (*He shall feed his flock like a shepherd...*). I've listened to (and sung on occasion) Handel's *Messiah* many times over the past 60+ years. It has brought me waves of comfort, as do all the words from Isaiah 40.

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, thank you for the genius that was G.F. Handel, who was so moved by your words that he created a masterpiece that has comforted and inspired millions since 1741. May we always hear your voice through the music. Amen.*

Sara Blaha

December 12
God sings over me
Zephaniah 3:14-20

The LORD your God is in your midst, a victorious warrior. He will exult over you with joy, He will be quiet in His love, He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy
(Zephaniah 3:17, NASB)

This oracle of salvation at the conclusion of the book of Zephaniah brings a powerful message of hope. It promises God's deliverance of the people of Israel and their eventual restoration after coming through disaster. One image for God used in this passage is the Divine Warrior. This ancient and common depiction of the Divine in the Old Testament serves to bring hope to a people who cannot defend themselves, who cannot triumph through military might, but must depend on God to "fight their battles."

This intervention by God on behalf of the people is paralleled in verse 19, which illustrates God's preferential option for the outcast. This passage speaks of God saving the lame and gathering the outcast in the time of restoration. God operates to include those at the margins. Consistent with the New Testament, this concern for social justice is an essential part of the message of the Gospel.

Verse 17 contains a textual problem. The ancient versions (Hebrew and Greek) do not agree on what God does in the second of the three actions toward the people. The Hebrew version reads "he will be silent in his love" while the Greek version states "he will renew you in his love." The likely explanation is that the Greek has misread one of the Hebrew letters for another—seeing a *dalet* instead of a *resh*, which is perhaps the most common ancient scribal error. So, the principles of textual criticism—specifically, that the more difficult reading is more likely original—would suggest that the line read "he will be silent in his love," following the Hebrew. How do we understand God's silence in love? Jewish interpreters of this passage have argued that God is silent about punishment. That is, God's love leads to God not speaking words of judgment on the people.

In contrast to being silent about judgment, God does something quite unexpected: God sings. Instead of judgment or proclamations of doom, God rejoices in exuberant singing over the people as on a day of festival, according to verses 17-18. This Divine Warrior comes to deliver, and not punish; God arrives not as a judge, but as a serenader, sweetly singing a love song. This is good news! This is the message of the Gospel: God loves us, *really* loves us, and delights in us. God is not to be feared. God rejoices, removing our sin and our punishment, so we can live in God's love with songs of joy. God wants us to live out of joy and not fear, not obligation. God sings, and we are free to hear that song of love without guilt, without shame, without fear of punishment. God sings over us in love. God already loves us. God is already singing. Do we hear it? May we never stop hearing the song of love that God sings over each and all of us.

Steve Schweitzer
Academic Dean and Professor of Old Testament
Bethany Theological Seminary

December 13
Fully alive!
Malachi 3:1-4

*But who can endure the day of his coming,
and who can stand when he appears? (Malachi 3:2)*

The book of “the messenger” (Malachi) is a reminder in this Advent season of the warning and hope for Israel and to us today. The great and terrible “Day of the Jehovah” is coming and Malachi pulls out a list of why the Holy One will judge us.

“You groan and weep that God doesn’t find what you offer acceptable. Then you wonder, ‘Why?’ You cut God short in your offerings in order to take care of your own wants forgetting who you are actually robbing.”

“You leave the faithful mate of your youth in order to gain a ‘trophy spouse’. You forget God hates divorce as much as bloody, brutal violence.”

“You make the Almighty sick to his stomach when you create a world of cynicism with ‘fake’ news and ‘fake’ ideas by suggesting that those who do evil are still best buddies with the Holy One, and then you have the nerve to live ignoring the need for justice in your own communities while asking, ‘Where is the God of justice?’”

The Lord will testify against you and bear witness to your using and controlling people, your unfaithful relationships, and the fact that you oppress people by not paying them a living wage. Yahweh notices when you ignore the powerless, the elderly woman who is alone, or the parentless child who has no voice. The Sacred One says, ‘You who shove aside the foreigner have no respect for me.’”

And in the midst of Malachi’s address and warning, he reminds his people (and us) that Jehovah is so much the God of love that before that day of judgment comes, God will give us another chance to...“return to me, and I will return to you.”

Malachi expected that the prophet Elijah would return and prepare the way for the Lord’s coming. We know that the prophet Jesus most fully fulfills Malachi’s hope and vision. This prophet would be like a burning fire or fuller’s soap that removed our impurities and transformed even our meager offerings to God into offerings of righteousness. The One who is to come would not only show us the unending love of God, he would also be the One who taught us how to live and walk in justice and by doing so, would make us fully alive.

Ed Woodard

December 14
A different view
John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (John 1:1)

Of all of the New Testament writers, none were in a better position to give the details of Jesus' physical birth than the Apostle John.

Yet the telling of this beautiful story was left to Matthew, a former tax-collector and Luke, a physician.

The Apostle Matthew made sure to authenticate the genealogy of Jesus, tracing his lineage to Abraham and David. He shared the betrothal of Mary to Joseph, the frightening appearances of angels, and the visit of the Magi.

Dr. Luke spends time covering the background of our Savior's birth. He includes the announcement of John the Baptist's birth, the visit of Gabriel to Zechariah and Mary as well as a census decree that results in a trip to Bethlehem by Joseph and Mary. He includes his well-known 'No room for them in the Inn' statement that is heard in just about every Christmas pageant. Dr. Luke gives us the account of the birth in a humble stable, of angels singing and of shepherds keeping watch over their flocks.

When we come to the Gospel of the Apostle John, we might expect lots of additional details about Jesus' birth. After all as Jesus hangs on the cross, he assigns John the responsibility of being a son to Mary and of Mary being a mother to him (John 19:26-27). Certainly we would expect that he and Mary had many conversations about this most important birth.

Yet John skips over Jesus' human birth and goes all the way back to the beginning of time. There on edge of eternity past, the Holy Spirit reminds John that the Son of God already existed. The opening words of Old Testament, "In the beginning ...", marks the point at which *chronos* time was created for humankind. Certainly our world revolves around the concept of time as we live by the measurement of seconds, minutes, hours, years, etc. When I was a child, this measurement of time seemed to move so slowly, especially in the weeks before Christmas.

Certainly our Christmas plays would be much harder to stage without the details that Matthew and Luke provide. But John wants us to see that Jesus is more than a baby bundled in 'swaddling clothes' (Luke 2:7 KJV). He is God incarnate, the one who exists from 'everlasting till everlasting', the one who chose to come and live among us. Jesus is the Christ, the true Light, the one who took our human nature upon himself and provides a way of salvation. So while our thoughts of Christmas are blessed by kings and angels and shepherds, our faith is stretched to worship God who reveals himself as the eternal Son of Man.

(1) Barnes' Notes on the New Testament.

Horace Light

December 15
Joseph, a righteous man
Matthew 1:18-25

But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit
(Matthew 1:20)

We all know some people who stand in the background and do the right thing because it needs to be done but whose name doesn't usually make the headlines. We call them the unsung heroes. In Jesus' birth narrative, Joseph is that person. Aside from the listing of Joseph in Jesus' lineage and the angel Gabriel's visitation to Joseph, not much attention is given to him in Scripture.

Even in our Christmas pageants, Joseph is portrayed as a secondary character. The shepherds get more mention than Joseph. They receive the angel's announcement, leave their sheep to travel and kneel at the manger. Then there are the wise men making their grand entrance dressed regally, having traveled from afar bearing their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But Joseph is simply standing quietly beside Mary.

But we must remind ourselves that it is Joseph who has the dilemma of what he should do when it is learned that Mary is expecting a child even though they have not come together. By Jewish custom, he is justified in divorcing her. This was often done in a public and demeaning manner. But, Scripture tells us, "Joseph, being a righteous man did not want to subject her to public disgrace decided to 'put her away' quietly."

It is Joseph who cares for Mary on the hard journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem as they go to register for the census. It is Joseph who makes the long and difficult journey with Mary to Egypt to escape the fury of the madman, Herod.

Righteousness is often associated with judgement, but for Joseph righteousness meant judgement tempered with mercy. His concern was for Mary's wellbeing more than the letter of the Law. Could this be a foreshadowing of Jesus' message and ministry? Jesus said, "I am not come to destroy the law and the prophets but to fulfill them." Jesus desires righteous living, but it is His mercy and grace that draws people to Himself. Those who receive it with gratitude and live accordingly are the ones who become part of the Kingdom of God.

In this Advent time let us, you and I, take stock of our lives. Are we being "righteous" people?

Garland Brown

December 16
*My soul magnifies
the Lord*
Luke 1:46-56

*And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Luke 1:46-47)*

This beautiful song of Mary is often called the "Magnificat" and it comes after Mary arrives for her visit with Elizabeth. The song has important echoes from the song of Hannah after the birth of her son, Samuel (1 Samuel 2: 1-10), as well as phrases borrowed from Psalms 89, 98, 103, and 107. It is a song filled with Mary's praising God as well as an understanding of how God acts in the world.

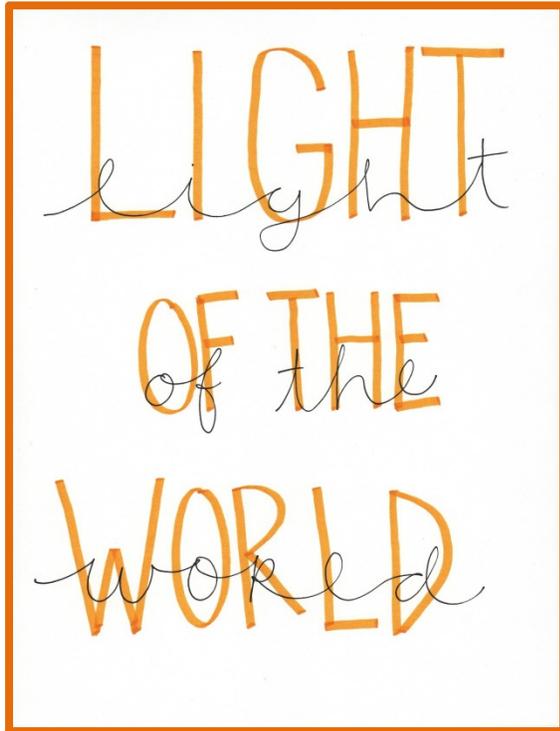
The words "My soul magnifies the Lord" intrigue me. What does it mean when our souls "magnify" the Lord? The Phillips translation renders that phrase as "My heart is overflowing with praise of my Lord." The NIV translates: "My soul glorifies the Lord." How do you magnify the Lord?

The Magnificat is a moving song of praise, and it is also, as E. Stanley Jones said, "the most revolutionary document in the world." Read carefully verses 52-53: "He (God) has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty." This is not good news for most of us (by global standards, most Americans are the "rich" of this world). This is a picture of the "Upside Down Kingdom" that Jesus proclaimed in Luke 4: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me for he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free..." As followers of Jesus, how do we align ourselves with the upside down Kingdom of God? Advent offers us a wonderful opportunity to reflect on the Kingdom brought forth by Jesus' birth. What does it mean to be citizens of that Kingdom of God?

Prayer: *Gracious God, our souls magnify you! Help us to live in your Kingdom-way so that we might reflect the light of your Son, Jesus." Amen.*

Chris Douglas
Director, Annual Conference Office
Church of the Brethren

December 17-23



December 17, 2017
Third Sunday of Advent

Light of the World

"Light of the world, into our darkness come." But remember, even total darkness is vanquished by a tiny ember. Total despair from a massive shooting is lessened slightly by a loving arm around a family member. Hopelessness from years of abuse is lifted with hope by a listening ear, or given a safe place to be. The light of Christ gives hope to the hopeless. And we have that Light. We need to let our Light shine on injustice, on the lonely, on the hopeless. You, people of the Light, have showered me with Love and Light in my grieving this summer, with my Dad's death, and continued to this fall, with the passing of my Mom. Thank you for being Light to me, when I have been

engulfed at times, with so much darkness.

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5)

Written by Shawn Kirchner, of LaVerne Church of the Brethren, California, this hymn was used in each service of worship in the 2016 Annual Conference in Greensboro, NC.

Prayer

Light of the World, you entered the darkness of our world because we have no light powerful enough to drive out the darkness on our own. You sent prophets ahead of you to prepare for your arrival. Your Spirit has equipped leaders to prepare persons in this generation for your coming again.

Empower us, as we bring light to these days. Help us, as we

**proclaim liberty to the captive
release to the prisoners
and provide for those who mourn.**

Strengthen us, as we proclaim the year of Your favor. Help us, as we

**build up those whose lives have been ruined
repair decayed and crumbling parts of our city
and work to undo the devastations of many generations.**

December 18
*Trust—in unusual
circumstances*
Luke 1:57-66

*But his mother said,
"No; he is to be called John." (Luke 1:60)*

John the Baptist was undoubtedly an unusual individual, so it is not surprising to learn of the out of the ordinary events surrounding his birth. Recall earlier in Luke 1 that the angel Gabriel silenced John's father, Zechariah, after delivering the message that Zechariah's wife would have a child. This child was to be named John, and he would play a key role in preparing God's people for the Messiah. Given the couple's age, Zechariah was doubtful, so the angel took away his ability to speak until this promise was fulfilled.

Fast forward to today's scripture where Zechariah's wife, Elizabeth, has given birth to a healthy baby boy. Relatives and neighbors have gathered for the circumcision ceremony when an argument erupts. The group assumes the child will be given a family name as is tradition, but Elizabeth speaks up to announce the child's name will be John. Only after the group presses Zechariah for his opinion does he agree, and his speech is restored.

At this point in the story, one might wonder why Elizabeth was the one to reveal this information. Yes, the simple answer is that Zechariah was unable to speak physically, but given he was a priest and the child's father, it seems more likely that he would have played a lead role in this ceremony. However, Zechariah seems to take a back seat to Elizabeth. Was he still having reservations? Did Zechariah need her strong faith to speak for him, literally and figuratively? The text does not share his thoughts, but it does make clear that Elizabeth initiated their decision to fulfill God's promise. At first, like Zechariah, we may fail to comply with God's requests. We may hesitate. We may doubt. But we must open our minds to trust God. He will provide the support—or in Zechariah's case the person—to help us accomplish what He asks of us. We just need to be willing to speak up and answer His call.

Ellen Phillips

December 19
Bearing fruit
Luke 3:1-18

Bear fruits worthy of repentance (Luke 3:8a)

I have always been a guy who likes to make lists in my head. What's my All Star team of the National league from 1970-1980? Who are my top five favorite hair metal bands? And sometimes I think about my top people in the Bible I'd like to hang out with.

I normally debate whether John the Baptist belongs on that list. He lived in the desert, which is not in the plus column. He ate honey and locusts, which I hear are very good if properly prepared. He was decked out in camel hair clothes and a leather girdle, but was more about substance than style. Jesus said John the Baptist was among the greatest of men. So, yeah, he makes the list.

There is no one in the Bible who better personifies Advent than John the Baptist. He both foreshadowed Christ's coming and actively played a part in it through the baptism of our Lord.

This passage deals with emergence of John the Baptist's ministry. John was not given to speaking in parables. He was direct in his indictment of the crowds that came to be baptized ("You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?") but reasonable in his expectations. He asked tax collectors to collect no more than they were supposed to and for soldiers not to extort money. But the line that resonated with me was from verse 8: *Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.*

Just as a walnut tree bears walnuts and a dog barks not to become a dog but because he is a dog, the natural residue of a transformation in being is a transformation in living.

In this spirit of a season that is epitomized by hope and love, I remember the words to the old hymn I used to sing at camp, "They'll know we are Christians by our love..." Above all else, love should be a constant fruit of our repentance.

Todd Marcum

December 20
The revelation
Luke 2:1-7

*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 (Luke 2:7)*

It takes patience to be an innkeeper, especially when you're old and rheumatism makes your life miserable.

A tenant is liable to complain about anything. One even swore he saw a rat in his room. I told him he must have drunk too much wine!

Some days my work might be slow, but when it's time for a Roman census, people descend on me like a hoard of locusts. I don't have room for them all. Then I have to listen to a lot of groaning and fussing, and travelers can get really ugly when I say, "Go find someplace else!"

One night during the last census a man with a young woman wanted to stay at my inn, but there was no room left. The woman looked as though her baby might be born any minute. I thought, "They really do need help but . . . it's not my responsibility."

They looked so worn and the man pleaded so earnestly until I finally told them to stay in my barn. At least that could be some shelter. They were very grateful as he slowly led his old donkey there.

I was amazed to see one great big bright beautiful star shining directly over my barn and wondered if maybe I just imagined it because I drank too much wine, trying to deal with rude, noisy people and hateful rheumatism, too.

Later that night I was concerned about the couple in my barn, so I reached for my cane and limped out to see if they were all right. To my surprise, shepherds were there and a baby was in the manger.

I moved closer to the Child and very gently touched His small outstretched hand. Suddenly, I had the most wonderful warm feeling, and all my pain was gone.

I fell to my knees beside a shepherd as an angel said to me, "This boy is the Messiah God promised to send."

Barbara Mann

December 21
Lessons in compassion
Luke 2:1-7

...there was no place for them in the inn. (Luke 2:7)

The Advent season contains many names: Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus, the Christ child, shepherders or shepherds, Angels, the Magi and of course, the Innkeeper. For me, the Innkeeper showed compassion and made room for Mary and Joseph.

The 2011 Annual Conference encouraged Brethren to have “conversations about human sexuality outside the query process” and to “challenging openly the widespread fear, hatred, and harassment of homosexual persons.” I offer this story in that light. The following paragraphs provide a true example about my employer’s accommodation of a male employee’s desire to become a female while working in the workplace. I was the Human Resources Administrator responsible for the following.

It was in October, about 30 years ago, when this male employee came into the HR office and shared with me that there was a female inside his body. He was 29 years old with a wife and two small children. They had left him. I asked him to explain and let him share. He had already started hormone therapy; and he was beginning to show signs of change, for example, losing facial hair. During this initial meeting, we discussed health insurance, and also, talked about the accommodations he might need.

The following months saw many changes. One day he would wear make-up and earrings. Another he would have on a blouse and work jeans. He would go on a road call and carry his purse along with his tool box. He had many needs and was receiving help from the medical community, both physical and psychological. On one of the many occasions I had the opportunity to talk to him, we talked about the visitors that came to see him during the workday. I did intervene that time; because it was disruptive in the workplace. It was a challenging time for the employer and the employee; with everyone wanting to do the right thing. His fellow employees were not as tolerant. Many made fun of him and as I reflect back, it probably seemed like a circus in the workplace.

A more challenging time came when he started going into the women’s rest room. The female employees screamed as one would expect. I informed him that he could not use the ladies’ room until he completed his sex change procedure. He indicated he was ready and asked if I would help get the insurance approval. As you might expect experimental/cosmetic surgery of this nature was denied. He wanted to think about his options.

Two weeks later, he/she came to the HR office one afternoon and brought me his resignation. He expressed appreciation for the employer’s support. He had secured employment in DC and indicated their health insurance would meet his needs. He was a beautiful female, dressed appropriately. I was even asked who that attractive woman was. My reply, “He is one of our mechanics.”

Both stories showed compassion: my employer’s caring for an employee and the Innkeeper by making room for Mary and Joseph. In this Advent season, we are all called to be Innkeepers and show compassion.

Leland Flora

December 22
Peace and Rest
Luke 2:8-20

*"Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing
that has taken place, which the Lord has made known
to us" (Luke 2:15)*

One brilliant star came beaming down
to shed its light upon a barn.
Its awesome bright and golden ray
led lonely shepherds on their way.

They followed it with joy and fear
and as they walked, they said a prayer.
At last they found the little Child
Who came so very meek and mild.

God's Son lay in a manger bed,
a place where cows and donkeys fed.
He smiled at them as they came near.
Their hearts were glad. They lost their fear.

Messiah came that holy night
to give the world his precious light.
To save our souls He bled and died,
yet lives today, though crucified.

His name is Jesus, and He brought
salvation with the things he taught.
If you will seek Him, you'll be blessed,
for He will give you peace and rest.

Barbara Mann

December 23
A night of splendor
Luke 2:8-20

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields keeping watch over their flocks by night (Luke 2:8)

The life of a shepherd was lonely, arduous, and filled with danger. Their task was to protect their sheep from the wild animals and bandits who were prevalent in that time. They slept in shifts through the four watches of the night so someone was awake at all times. Shepherding was a full-time job. As we would say today, it was 24/7/365.

The sheep they were caring for were probably not just any sheep. Some biblical scholars believe that due to the close proximity of Bethlehem to Jerusalem that the sheep these shepherds were raising were for the ritual sacrifices in the Temple. We can't be sure. If so, the sheep they shepherded needed to be without blemish. Herein lies a paradox. The shepherds sometimes had to assist in the birthing process which put them in contact with blood. They sometimes had to handle a dead sheep. Both of these things made them ceremonially unclean. Since their occupation consumed all of their time there was little opportunity to go to the Temple for the purification rites. They were in a religious "Catch-22."

But on this holy night they were not a forgotten, rejected people; they were chosen by God to hear the news of the Savior's birth. They received the message from an angel and a heavenly choir. The announcement came not to priests, princes, the "movers and shakers" of the time but to shepherds, folks on the lower strata of Jewish society. "Then an angel of the Lord stood before them and the **glory of the Lord** shone around them and they were terrified" (NRSV). Those poor shepherds were totally unequipped for such a greeting!

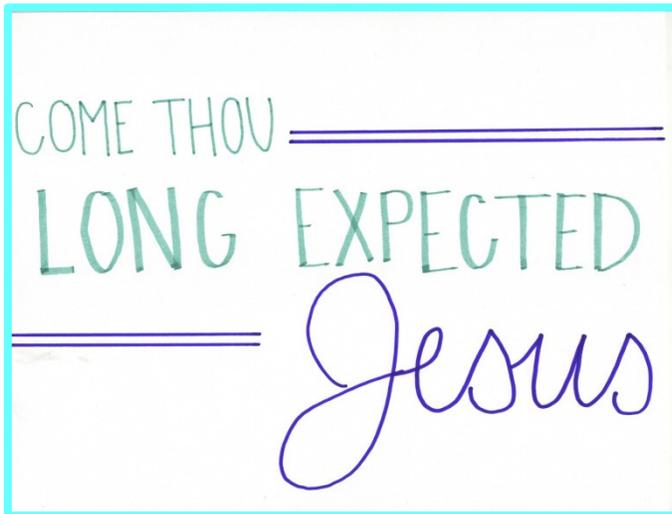
The glory of the Lord has been described as the brightness of the perfection of the all sufficient God. The Bible records several appearances of the glory of the Lord. Some of them are: when God appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai, at the dedication of the tabernacle in the wilderness, and the dedication of the Temple. Apparently there was some dramatic physical manifestation when the glory of the Lord appeared. The glory of the Lord is said to have inhabited the temple. But as Israel fell into idolatry, the glory of the Lord disappeared from the Temple. Now, hundreds of years later, at the birth of Jesus, the glory of the Lord returned and appeared to some shepherds on a Judean hill.

After the angel had quieted the shepherds' fears and the heavenly choir went away, they joyously hurried to Bethlehem to worship the Christ Child. They found the scene exactly as the angel had told them. As they returned to the fields, they gave thanks and told everyone they met about what they had heard and seen.

How appropriate is it that the first persons to see and tell about the birth of the child born to be the Good Shepherd, the Lamb of God, were keepers of lambs?

Garland Brown

December 24-30



December 24, 2017
Fourth Sunday of Advent

Come, thou long-expected Jesus
Hymn # 178, Hymnal: a worship book

Charles wrote some 6,500 hymns (including *Hark! the herald angels sing*, and *Oh, for a thousand tongues to sing*), as he pastored in England, Ireland, and Wales. Persuaded by his brother John (also a pastor and hymn writer), they traveled to Savannah, Georgia as missionaries in 1735. During the year

they were there, Charles was influenced greatly by some devout Moravians, and in 1738, after returning to Europe, he converted.

The hymn idea comes from Haggai 2:7: "...the desire of all nations shall come". It reminds us of the dichotomy that our Savior is a child (earthly), and yet a King (supernatural/spiritual).

Charles Wesley was the 18th child of his parents. Perhaps his mother understood waiting, even more vividly than her hymn-writing sons. More than 18 times she waited for nine months to experience the births of her children. She could relate to that part of Mary's story. The anticipation. Each Advent, we are invited to wait again. We take the time to anticipate, to ready ourselves for the birth of this baby, our Savior.

Prayer

Come, long expected Jesus. As generations of old awaited your coming, we await your coming again. We are awe-struck by beauty and grace; we are heart-sick by the ugliness and disaster we see around us.

From our fears and sins release us. Left to our own devices, we cannot rise above our suffering and our sin. Thank you for your abundant grace which welcomes us home.

Come, long expected Jesus. As the thought of Christmas stirs the hearts of our children and fills their days with great anticipation, awaken our spirits to long for more of your presence in our lives.

Let us find our rest in you. We are busy and distracted with opportunities and responsibilities; rule in our hearts, that we might find the joy of our salvation in our hearts.

Monday, December 25, 2017
Christmas Day

A Prayer for Christmas Dinner

*Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her king;
Let ev'ry heart prepare him room,
and heav'n and nature sing, and heav'n and nature sing, and heav'n and nature sing.*
(#318, Hymnal: a worship book)

Jesus, we stand in a strange in-between time. You have already come, but not yet returned. Your work is already done, but there is much yet to do. This world in which we live and play and love and follow you is beautiful—and violent; fulfilling—and destructive. We have



everything we need—and are often hungry, dissatisfied, and bored. We have security—and we remain trapped by our fears. As we look at the neighborhoods surrounding our homes and our churches, we recognize that we are surrounded by so much beauty, and so much ugliness. How are we to live in a world of such contradiction?

On this Christmas Day, we pray for the chance to begin again. Help us find the faith of Mary and Joseph, that we might take new steps in boldness. Stir up within us the curiosity of the shepherds, that we might seek you out in unexpected places. Surprise us with angelic encounters, and help us leave behind fears, attitudes, and preconceptions that would keep our response from being anything less than an enthusiastic "Yes!"

In the midst of our Christmas celebration and our post-Christmas decompressing, help us to keep the words "Joy to the world, the Lord is come!" close to our lips. As your help came to so many before us—in the form of angelic visitors, guiding stars and the gift of grace—we trust that you will help us find you again as well.

In your name, we pray. Amen.

December 25
The Children's Story
Luke 2:8-20

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us" (Luke 2:15)

There were shepherds in the field keeping watch over their flocks that special night, and the angels appeared to them and told them to go and see the new baby born in Bethlehem. Lots of you have been shepherds when we tell the Christmas story. You know I like sheep almost as much as I like you all. That's why every shepherd has a sheep or two to care for when we tell the story of Jesus' birth in the stable. It's very special to be a caregiver. You can hold your sheep today while I tell our story.

Sheep remind me a lot of people. Sheep are smart like you all. They recognize sheep faces and people faces. They like to stay in a group called a flock, and they like to be able to look up and see one another. They follow one another and they follow the shepherd. They seldom walk in a straight path though. They have such good eyesight, as they move from left to right, they can see behind them as they walk. They like to see where they've been and where they're going. People are like that too. We like to remember where we've been and what we've learned and how God has been there with us through the good and the bad and the every day. It helps us know where we're going to know where we've been. Sheep are also like us because even though they like to be together, sometime they go off on their own. Just a little trip away to see if they might be missing something. Sometimes they lose their way, the other sheep get worried, and so does the shepherd. So off he goes to find the lost sheep. He leaves the others taking care of one another and staying close together as he goes to find, and then return, the lost sheep to the flock family.

You know we've talked before about the many names we have for the baby born that first Christmas day – Savior, Christ, Emmanuel, the Prince of Peace. One of the names Jesus called himself was the Good Shepherd. In the Gospel of John, chapter 10, Jesus said "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." It makes me feel very good and well cared for, when I remember that Jesus is our shepherd and we are the sheep in his flock family.

The shepherds were very important to the sheep they cared for, but they didn't seem very important to other people living 2000 years ago. They were not rich or famous, they were just ordinary people like we are. So, it's interesting that God chose them as the first folks to hear the news of the birth of his son Jesus. A choir of angels filled the sky with song and the news, telling the shepherds to go to Bethlehem and see what had happened, and then give the news of the newborn king to all they met. So some plain and simple people were given very special work to do. God gives each of us, on our own, or with our "flock," the opportunity to tell the story and to live the way Jesus showed us as he grew up here on earth.

You were such good listeners today.

Prayer: *Dear God, help us remember to celebrate Jesus birth every day and to be always helpful and peaceful. In His name we pray, Amen.*

Martha Gregory

December 26
*Seeking the newborn
King*
Luke 2:8-20

*In that region there were shepherds living in the fields,
keeping watch over their flock by night...
So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph,
and the child lying in the manger (Luke 2:8, 16)*

All my life, I have heard the story of the angels appearing to the shepherds. I hadn't realized who shepherds are and how miraculous their arrival at the manger must have been until we were in Morocco a couple of years ago.

On an overcast February day, we drove along the highway from Marrakesh to the coast. I looked out the van window at the stubby fields, occasionally populated by sheep and shepherd, or goats and goatherd, often miles apart. We had stopped earlier to take pictures of a "goat tree," paying the attending goatherd for the privilege of snapping a photo of his herd of goats perched on various branches of the argan tree, contently munching on argan seeds. Like all the men we had seen in the fields tending their animals, the goatherd wore the heavy, woolen traditional *djallba* that protects against the chill of the northern Africa winter.

I have never been to the Middle East, but I wonder if these fields are similar to those where the shepherds were keeping watch over their flocks when the angels appeared. The miles of barren pasture flew by the windows as our guide drove the van over the paved road, different from the earth that thousands of years of human and animal feet had tamped down on their way from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Did those shepherds know of each other's existence? I can't imagine they got together often, but did they gather in a group to find the Christ child? Or did they travel the long distance from their secure fields, alone except for their animals to see the newborn baby the angels announced? I marvel at the miracle of the depth of faith that propelled them on to worship the newborn Savior.

Prayer: *Dear Lord, may we be inspired to leave our places of comfort and isolation to follow the mystery of the divine birth this Christmas season, so that just like the shepherds, our hearts are open as we are led to the holy manger to worship the newborn king. Amen*

Kris Tilley-Lubbs

December 27
*Gold, frankincense, and
myrrh*
Matthew 2:1-12

On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh (Matthew 2:11)

The Wise Men, or Magi, told about in this scripture were astrologers who watched the heavens; they believed that the movements of heavenly bodies were related to events on earth. At the time of Jesus' birth they observed a special star in the heavens and believed that it portended the birth of a king so they decided to follow it wherever it led. It, of course, led them to Palestine after a very long journey, maybe as much as two years.

Since the Magi believed that a king had been born they brought gifts worthy of a king, expensive gifts. The gifts brought to the infant king, Jesus, were gold, myrrh, and frankincense. Since there were three gifts it has been assumed that there were three Magi. Maybe not; but since three is a sacred number in Jewish/Christian history it works well as a tradition. Actually there were most likely an entourage of servants accompanying these men as likely they were wealthy.

Much has been made of the symbolic meaning of these gifts, and rightly so.

Gold was the property of kings and denotes power, position, and royalty. So it is with Jesus. He was present at the creation of the world and has dominion over the whole of creation so He has power. His earthly ancestry was from the royal line of King David. So he was from royalty. He will judge the world at the end of days and every knee will bow before him and confess that he is King of Kings and Lord of Lords; he has position.

Myrrh was the fragrance of death. Jesus died a sacrificial death so that our sins could be taken away and be removed from us as far as the east is from west if we but trust him. Myrrh was used for embalming the body in preparation for burial.

Frankincense was the fragrance of resurrection. It symbolizes the sweet smell of newness of life. We can be renewed or "born again" as Jesus told Nicodemus. Frankincense is believed to have come from Ethiopia.

While the symbolic meaning of these gifts is appropriate, these treasures may well have provided capital for the journey of the Holy Family from Judea to Egypt, from Egypt to Nazareth and for their sojourn in Egypt until King Herod died and they could return.

Were these treasures traditional gifts to kings or did God inspire the Magi to bring them to Jesus? Either way, God provides.

Garland Brown

December 28
The visit of the wise men
Matthew 2:1-12

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road
(Matthew 2:12)

As much as two years may have passed in Jesus's life before the arrival of the Magi. This term refers to a wide range of persons who may have come from Babylon, Persia, or additional places. These persons could have been priests, students of sacred writings, pursuers of wisdom, and/or astrologers.

If we had accompanied them, we would have been in a large group with attendants and guards. A possible trip may have been from Babylon. If they and we took a main trade route to Bethlehem, which is six miles from Jerusalem, our journey would have been about 800 miles.

The Wise Men would likely have been familiar with an earlier prophecy that "A star shall come out of Jacob and a scepter shall rise out of Israel" (Numbers 24:17). A brilliant star guided them directly to the young Jesus.

A common assumption is there were three Wise Men. While scripture recorded the number of gifts, it did not indicate the number of givers.

Lets look for a moment at the gifts, which point to the birth of our Lord, His divine life and His death. Gold, a precious metal, frankincense, a resin used as the only incense on the altar (Exodus 30:9, 34-38) and myrrh, a sap used in incense and perfume.

If we look into the future, the gospels also recorded the Lord's resurrection, which made the oils and the spices the women brought to prepare Jesus's body for a proper burial thankfully not needed.

Now shall we explore another character in our story. Herod, no doubt, received reports of this strange caravan and secretly sought information from them. He requested they return with a report so he too could worship this new king. A master builder, who restored the temple in Jerusalem and orders many projects, Herod was a ruthless ruler who reportedly was responsible for the murders of some of his own family members (his wife, several sons and others). The birth of Jesus was certainly a threat of Herod's power and to the corrupt practices of that day.

The Wise Men correctly interpreted a dream and did not return as Herod had requested. Their gifts were likely used to provide for the Holy Family's soon trip to Egypt.

In 2018, may our prayer be that we come with our gifts to worship our Lord.

Jane Grisso
with input from the Seekers' Class

Sources of part of the information: The English Standard Version Study Bible

December 29
The spirit of terror
Matthew 2:16-18

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men (Matthew 2:16)

Our Christmas Pageant—as lovely as it is every year—never conveys the seriousness of the world into which Jesus was born. 2000 years of history and culture separate us from Jesus' world so it is hard to place ourselves in his situation.

In Palestine, the Romans controlled everything and every other group of people—especially the Jews—had to deal with this incursion. The Romans tolerated no threat to their absolute authority. A harmless prophet here or there was no big deal, but here in the Gospel of Matthew, the three wise men's prophecies terrify Herod. Herod doesn't yet know what kind of prophet Jesus will be but nevertheless he fears Jesus will be a threat to his own power.

But as we know, Jesus was born in a dirty and obscure part of a po-dunk town. There was no way to track down where this prophesied Messiah would be born. So to cover all his bases—and exert his total power—King Herod ordered the murder of every young boy in his jurisdiction.

Can you imagine this happening today? A whole state's young boys wiped out by decree?

Probably not. But the danger that Jesus was born into remains the sad reality for many young boys and girls around the world.

Right now, children in Myanmar live under fear of genocide, little ones in Nigeria fear what may happen if they go to school, and young immigrants in our own country fear they may become permanently separated from their parents.

The spirit of Herod's terror and fear lives on.

Safety was but a dream for Jesus and his parents as they fled to Egypt to escape Herod's dastardly decree. And safety remains a dream for many young ones and their families today.

As we continue living into this Advent season, let us remember that Jesus' birth was into a world of injustice and danger.

God watched over Jesus and his family during this danger. So let us imitate God and bring Christ's peace and justice to those facing injustice and danger in our own world. May it be so. Amen

Bryan Hanger

December 30
The mission
Luke 2:36-38

*At that moment she came, and began to praise God
and to speak about the child to all who were looking for
the redemption of Jerusalem (Luke 2:38)*

Luke's gospel tells us about a woman named Anna whose life turned out different from what she expected. Anna dreamed about marrying, having lots of children and grandchildren and spending her life with a loving family.

As a small girl, she often stayed beside her father in the fields. All was safe with his strong arms protecting her.

When she became fourteen, papa said she would soon marry a man he chose. She had thought about someone younger but waited obediently for her marriage and then for a son. After seven years, the unthinkable happened.

Anna's husband died. She felt heartbroken. He was always kind to her. Now she was alone...no husband, no child, only memories and a pillow wet with tears.

People said she would marry again, but she never wanted another husband and decided to live in the temple close to the God she loved. She stayed there continually, sleeping on a thin mat in a corner. It sufficed. Her food was a handout now and then. It was enough.

Some people looked at old thin Anna and thought, "What a waste," but she was content. God was all she needed and wanted. An angel told her in a dream that God would send his Son into the world to save the world and she would see Him and hold Him.

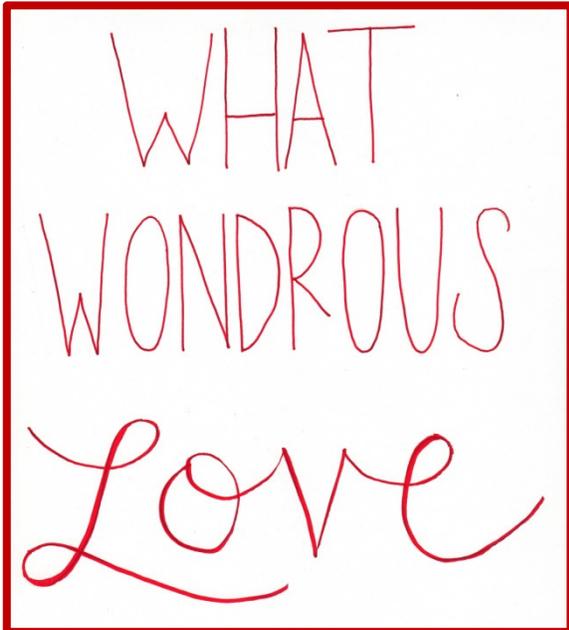
Anna carefully searched faces of every couple and their forty day old child brought to the temple for dedication to God. Each time she thought, "Could this be the One?" But none were the one she longed to see. She continued to hope until she saw Mary and Joseph and Jesus with Simeon.

Anna recognized Jesus immediately! She felt truly blessed to see and hold the Messiah, through Whom salvation would go from Jerusalem to the world. Her mission in life was accomplished because she became a witness for Him.

Hallelujah!

Barbara Mann

December 31 – January 6



December 31, 2017

What wondrous love is this
Hymn # 530, Hymnal: a worship book

I learned this hymn while in the choir at Lynchburg Church of the Brethren. Our pastor's wife, Innabelle Kline, played the organ and directed the choir. The haunting minor melody helps color the driving text. In the liturgical year, Lent eventually follows the birth of Christ. This hymn hurries that process and recognizes that Love was born, so that Love could save us. Each verse paints a clear picture of our dark, helpless souls, of our Savior's death, and then our salvation through Christ: "And when from death I'm free, I'll sing on, I'll sing on, and when from

death I'm free, I'll sing on." Often, the accompanist twists the last minor chord (by simply changing the middle note of the chord up one half step) into a major chord. The singers usually emphasize that "3rd", the note that changes the chord into a bright, joyful sound, symbolizing our freedom in and through Christ, our Savior. "I'll sing on!"

Prayer

Jesus, it has been both satisfying and challenging to hear the strong, direct words of the prophets, and to remember again the familiar stories of your birth. Thank you for being with us as we have made study and prayer a priority. Thank you for guiding us through the joys and sorrows of 2017, as you have so many years before. What wondrous love is this—that you give us everything we need when we can be so much less than what you intend?

There is a whole year ahead of us with unknown decisions, challenges and opportunities. We seek to hear the words you said to your first disciples, "Follow me." Help us to not fear the unknown. Help us not back down from faithfulness simply because the challenge is hard. Help us not give in to the siren calls of consumerism, personal comfort, and individual choice. Help us be faithful.

What wondrous love is this! Thank you, Jesus, for loving each one of us.

Amen.

January 1
Expectations
Luke 2:41-52

Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"
(Luke 2:49)

In the second chapter of Luke, Jesus' parents started on their trip back home from Jerusalem and believed Jesus was in the same traveling group. However, they could not find him and had to return. They found him talking with teachers in the temple. This was not where they expected him to be or what they expected him to be doing. He told them he had to be about his fathers' business, but they did not understand at the time.

Most of Jesus' friends and neighbors, and possibly his parents in his early years, may have expected him to be a carpenter like his father. We, as parents, also develop expectations for our children. These expectations are not always what our children want to do. In youth sports and other activities I often see parents who expect their children to be the "best" and often get upset if the child does not live up to those expectations. Others may expect their children to enter occupations in which the child has no interest. These differences in expectations can cause a great deal of conflict in a child's life if it is forced too hard.

Expectations in life need to be open to change. Life is like a construction project. There are original plans that almost always have changes made as building progresses. Then there are as-built plans that reflect the changes and the way the project turned out. As-built plans are essential to understand how to operate the building or facility properly. Life is the same way. It is not always good or fun, but I guarantee the end result will not be exactly like your original plans. It is essential that we learn and grow with these changes. What we do with our life as these changes occur is the important thing. I believe there are only two stages of life. We continue to learn and grow or we begin to slowly die. Which stage are you in?

I grew up in a family of multiple generations of pastors and I know some people expected me to follow the same career. I have had several career paths, not all successful, but not as a pastor. I sometimes wonder about some of the decisions I have made and the directions I took. However, God must have been guiding me. A couple of the decisions I might have made would have caused me to never meet my wonderful wife of 46 years. Had I not met her, I would have our three children, their spouses, and our grandchildren. I might have missed our many good friends. We don't always agree on everything because we are all different. But they make my life enjoyable and worth living. I thank God for helping me make the decisions that I did.

We are a small part of an enormous world with a vast variety of people, and a lot of different views. Every person in this world is different because their lives and beliefs are the sum of their life experiences. In spite of all these differences, our actions affect many others on a daily basis. Try to set aside your differences and use your life with all its changes, to make a difference in the life of someone else. Your experiences can be very valuable to them.

Jesus followed the path that God ordained for him. Has God influenced your path? Maybe he has, more than you know.

Ralph Petcher

January 2
Holy Spirit and fire
Matthew 3:1-12

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire
(Matthew 3:11)

"He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." Jesus later preached the good news concerning the coming of God's Kingdom.

I was from a family of thirteen. In my non-Christian home there was angry, abuse, cursing, and violence.

In 1940 my sister and I were invited to attend a church service by a neighbor's child. On a Sunday in late fall the neighbor, my older sister, younger brother and I walked out the back door of our home to route old 460 (abandoned around 1930). The grass between the old concrete road had turned a dark brown. We passed over an old bridge that was no longer in use. The creek beneath the bridge flowed into hard rock, our swimming hole. Crossing the railroad, we walked through a meadow that was still wet from the dew. After walking for a mile, we saw a large white building with a bell on top.

A tall slender man greeted us at the door. Later we joined four to five other children in a small room. A woman welcomed everyone with a beautiful smile and hug. After the class was over we joined the adults in the large open space with long benches where everyone was laughing, talking and hugging. I heard a lot of "I love you". A man stood behind a large, tall, square box talking and occasionally yelling. This was my first exposure to the Christian church. This early exposure to the "community of love" changed my life. It produced in me a warm and fuzzy feeling that has remained with me my entire life. When stress and heartache come into my life, I always remember this experience with Christ. The arrival of Christ from heaven has brought a transformation in individuals, families, countries, and even the world.

Praise God for the birth of Christ!

Gilbert Henshaw

January 3
An honest ancestry
Matthew 1:1-17

A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham (Matthew 1:1)

Today many people around the world long for a stabilizing sense of who they are. Increasing violence has made us feel less safe, and we blame others, who are not like us in some way(s), for taking “our” jobs, neighborhoods, etc. In times like these, it seems almost instinctual for us human beings to consider where we came from, to return to our roots in a particular community, with certain beliefs and values that have nurtured and guided us. Part of this return may involve searching out, or remembering, our own genealogy. Staying connected—or returning—to one’s roots can help provide a healthy self-image. As a child I got to know our ancestors on my mother’s side of the family by looking at old photos and listening to my grandparents tell their stories. Their faith and humanity helped form my own. But an ominous kind of returning to one’s roots has re-appeared in recent years, in the form of nationalism. Nationalism involves a country’s assertion of self-governance and the development of a national identity based on religion, race, culture or belief in a common ancestry. It is typically exclusive and divisive.

Compare nationalism to what we find in a study of Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus Christ. Matthew demonstrates that both Abraham and David are ancestors of Jesus, so His Israelite spiritual heritage and His role as Messiah are solidly established. This is also apparent in the altered form of genealogy Matthew uses—while a typical record would list descendants of Jesus below His name, Matthew lists ancestors there. Four Gentile women are also listed to emphasize that God’s plan was always inclusive—to bring salvation to the Gentiles as well as the nation of Israel. Let all believers be strengthened and inspired by God’s desire that all people should be saved through faith in Jesus Christ!

Drew Purcell