



Advent 2016 Devotional

December 1

Our family gathered together to talk about what the Advent & Christmas season meant to us. Hoping we are fairly typical, we offer our thoughts:

Our daughter Morgan, in 5th grade, thinks Advent means everyone, no matter whether you are fat or skinny, Christian or Jewish, etc., can come together to love and worship. No one is perfect, but God loves us all.

Our older son Sam thinks the meaning of the four weekly candles is a good time for the family to come together to celebrate Christ and rejoice.

I (Kerri, the Mom) feel Advent is the season of hum. We, as Christians, get to pause and reflect on what it means to listen to the hum of good deeds to humankind. It's so important that my kids see my actions as an example of how to give back. It's a gift to be able to act as Jesus did and be an example to others.

My husband David and younger son Jake have always wanted one of those "candy things where you open a door and get chocolate!" Don't we all?

–The Shirey family

December 2

A recent sermon reminded me of what our family calls “our snack miracle.”

Sawyer was five and it was the first soccer game of the season. Because I had two older boys who played sports, I knew it was custom to bring a snack for after the game. We watched the game and when it was over, we opened one carton of juice which had 12 pouches in it. Then we opened bags of cookies with the same amount...just enough for the team. They all came running over in their little orange t-shirts, ready for their treat! Then all of a sudden we saw the *other* team running toward us. Because it was the first game, no one knew who brought the snacks.

At that moment I said to God, kind of joking but kind of not, please make these snacks like the loaves and fishes! So we began handing out the drinks and cookies to our team, then to the other team. We continued to pass them out even to younger siblings who were watching on the sideline.

When everyone received their snack, Sam, Scott and I looked in the box of juices and there were two pouches left! Sawyer took a look at the cookie bag and found 5 cookie packages left! We were all so amazed and couldn't believe what we were witnessing. We thanked God for His wonderful abundance, and to this day, call it our “Snack Miracle.” At this special time of year, we celebrate this as just one of God's many miracles in our lives...the greatest miracle being how God chose to come to us in Jesus. This is the miracle and the gift that makes *all* of our experiences and *all* of our relationships meaningful and abundant. Together we trust God in all circumstances, and so we celebrate His love in Jesus! Merry Christmas!

–Merrie Phillips-Duke

December 3

As with so many people I know, life has been a series of ups and downs. The holiday seasons have brought families close, but have also been difficult due to limited budgets. A couple of years ago, I bought a CD at a Christmas fair, thinking it was typical music by non-descript artists, but evidently someone had accidentally inserted a CD by Kenny Rogers.

On it, I found a song I never heard before, and it has become my theme song throughout the not-so-great days. "I TRUST YOU," Lord.

God said, "Mary, pure and holy,
With this baby I trust you."

She said, "Surely I'm not worthy,
And it scares me; I trust you."

Underneath the shining star in a manger stall
Mary held the gift of Love God gave to us all.

Precious Baby, Pure and holy,
Will you save me? I trust you.

Son of Mary, I TRUST YOU!

—Janice Greene

December 4

“Meanwhile, friends, wait patiently for the Master’s Arrival. You see farmers do this all the time, waiting for their valuable crops to mature, patiently letting the rain do its slow but sure work. Be patient like that. Stay steady and strong. The Master could arrive at any time.” (James 5:7-8, The Message)

I’ve never been good at patience.

I’m good at making detailed plans for the future. And I’m good at bustling around the house tidying up while we wait for guests to arrive. And if I’m waiting for someone in a restaurant or waiting in a check-out line, I’m good at finding something to do on my phone.

But waiting patiently for the rain “do its slow but sure work”? Waiting patiently, staying “steady and strong”? That is harder than any amount of preparations. Sitting in stillness, listening to my own heart, and waiting for God to stir in my soul – this is the hardest of all. Yet this is the slow and steady work of the one who would prepare for Christ’s coming. Like the farmer tilling the soil, our patient waiting prepares our hearts for the seed of the gospel. We may feel like crawling out of our skin when things get too still or silent – yet what feels like empty space or inactivity is actually the very work that makes way for God’s voice.

Every Advent, we are called to this kind of patience: a patience like that of the farmer, trusting God will send the rain in due season. As the days grow darker, we are called to trust that the sun will one day shine with the long evenings of summer. As the ground get colder, we are called to trust that bulbs will one day spring up again with the fresh color of crocuses and daffodils. May you lean into the silences today, inviting God to arrive at any time.

–Rev. Carissa Surber

December 5

A Very Long Christmas

Early in November, we departed Michigan to vacation in Indiana before going to our assignment. We celebrated Christmas with Norma's family and again with my family before flying from Louisville, KY to March AFB in California, then to Elmendorf, Alaska, on to Hickman AFB in Hawaii, finally landing at Yokota Air Base, Japan on Christmas Eve. Landing in Alaska for refueling, we were greeted with caroling and cookies by youth at the chapel; that was very thoughtful and much appreciated.

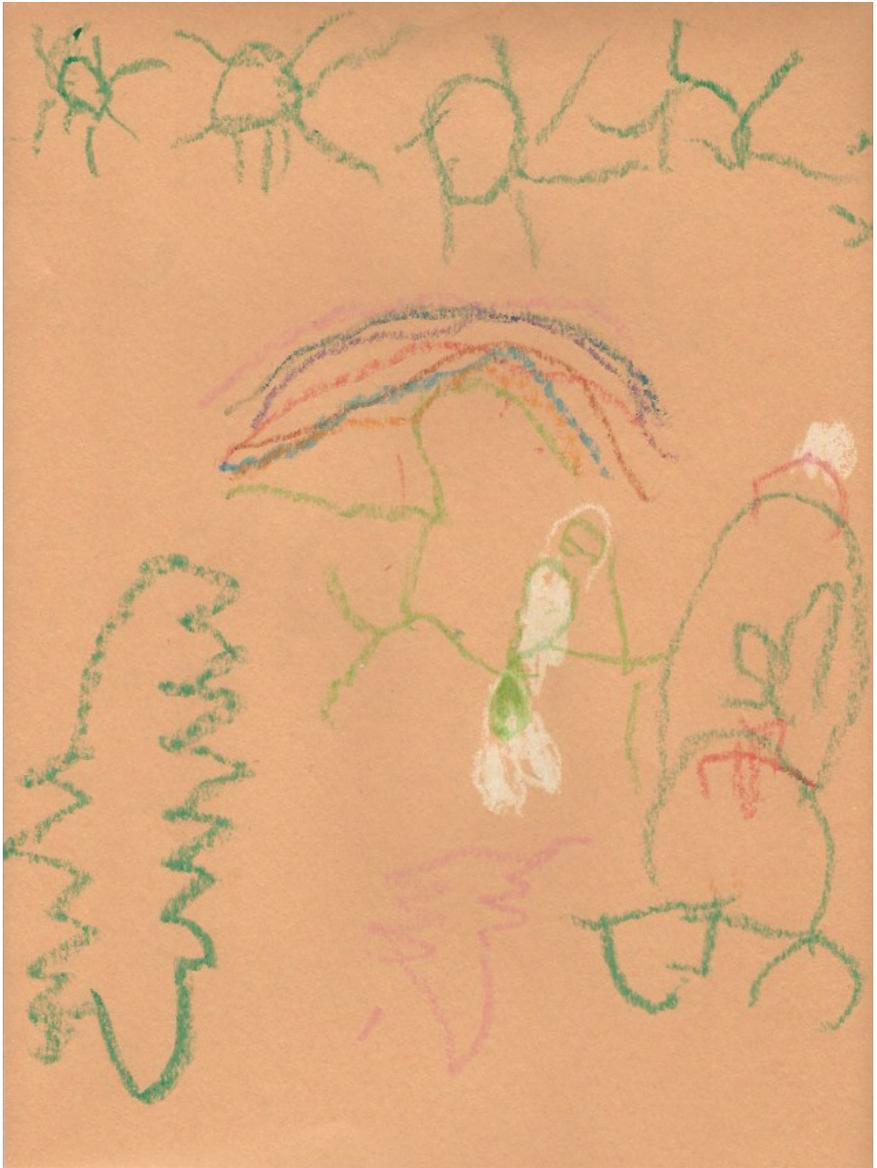
Our last in-flight meal on arrival in Japan included beautiful red apples. Robert did not eat his. It was taken from him by the immigration inspectors in the air terminal. He could not understand why and began to cry (4 years old). Our friends, the Rathjens, were waiting on the other side of the glass wall to welcome us and saw Robert's upset. Dave went immediately into the gift shop and purchased something to take Robert's mind off his upset.

We were taken to temporary billeting at Green Park in Tokyo. Dave and Kay picked us up the next day for Christmas dinner with them after the chapel worship service at the base. While waiting in Dave's office, he asked if we would like to talk with our folks in Indiana. Of course we said yes. He picked up his phone and said go ahead talk to them. He had prearranged with the Fuchu Kanto Mura switchboard to connect us with our families. What a dear, thoughtful friend! Upon arrival to our apartment in Green Park, we were exhausted from our travels and emotional about being away from our families. While preparing for bed, Norma got her suitcase and pulled out small gifts for Robert and me. She was so loving and thoughtful; it was a memorable ending to an unforgettable Christmas.

People in the Personnel Office, making assignments, surely had not thought through the impact of reassigning a chaplain prior to a major religious holy day. By assigning me, at the time they did, my services were lost to my old organization during the biggest holiday season of the year. I was not yet available to be of help to my gaining organization. So I lost both my services. The only good thing was I had Christmas at home before leaving (one of three times during a 31-year active service), and the fact that I was with my family to welcome the Christ child.

–Eldon Smith, Rob's father and frequent visitor to Severna Park UMC

December 6



—art by Jack Dolsak (age 4)

December 7

No Different

What does Christmas mean today? People ask this question like Christmas today is nothing like it was 2000 years ago. I guess that is a logical assumption because it appears to be all about shopping malls, Black Friday, cute movies, and rushing around. But for we who believe, let's compare...

We say Christmas is a time for family. Well, it started with a small, poor but faithful family who really needed each other in that stable.

We say Christmas is about lights and singing. Well, what better light than that from a miraculous star and the beautiful song of the angel chorus?

We certainly put emphasis on presents and giving. But why? It was the three kings who wanted to show adoration and were the first to offer gifts to the Christ child.

We say Christmas is about worshipping the baby. Well, that's exactly what the shepherds did. And they may have worshipped with a whole lot more passion than we sometimes put into it.

So Christmas today may look different than it did the night Jesus was born, but the very spirit and meaning have not and will never change over time.

The Son of God was born just like us so we could become just like Him!

Have a special, meaningful Christmas.

—Lee Ferrell

December 8

I went to a Quaker college. During that time, I attended the programmed meeting for worship across the street from campus. It was not unlike the Methodist service that I had grown up in, besides the long silent portion. I remember, though, that sometimes during the silence my mind would quite possibly wander off to an assignment I was working on or what time my boyfriend's (now husband's) lacrosse game was that afternoon. But occasionally, God would take over this silence. His peace would renew me, and I could head out with more energy, calm and purpose.

Robert Lawrence Smith wrote "Silence is as common as the air we breathe. It is a vast pool always available to us where we can refresh and renew ourselves, or simply stop in for a while. Silence is God's gift to our minds, a gift that modern life seems to have lost or crowded out. We need more silence in our lives, more stillness in our homes. We need, in our increasingly complex and frenetic world, to silence ourselves – and to listen."

I am a fairly quiet person who needs quiet time. Sometimes my quiet time still turns into creating to-do lists or worrying about stuff. But when I intentionally make room for silence, inevitably God will enter. He will bring peace and clarity to me.

In this Advent season, it is so easy to get swept up in the busyness and frenzy. My hope is that you will find time to JUST BE SILENT and that in this stillness you will hear and trust God's voice.

–Beth Frank

December 9

I love Christmas. It's my favorite time of the year. I love the carols, the decorations. It's always amazing to see how much some people decorate. I love the looks on young faces as they see all the lights, but also when they see Santa for the first time. I love the idea of snow on Christmas as long as it's gone by the next day.

What really drives me nuts at Christmas is all the commercialism. It upsets me that we are so busy shopping and baking that we forget the reason for Christmas. I get upset when young children think Santa Claus is the most important person for the season. I wonder when the parents are going to tell their children why we celebrate Christmas.

The Christmas season begins for me when I hear Nat King Cole singing "The Christmas Song." Or watching the animated version of "How The Grinch Stole Christmas." I like it because of its message. Once I can watch the 1938 version of "The Christmas Carol," then it feels like Christmas.

I wish all of you have a very Merry Christmas. Let's all remember the reason for the season.

—Cindy Rafferty

December 10

I sit here the week before Thanksgiving, amidst the “happy dust and chaos” of a huge remodeling project in our home. I say “happy” because it is every kitchen designer’s dream to one day design her own kitchen, and I feel very fortunate to be able to do so.

But, this also means there will be no holiday merriment in our house this year, and instead we will gather at our daughter’s house in Virginia for both Thanksgiving and Christmas. No Christmas tree, no candles and other festive decorations, no hot chocolate simmering on the stove, no nativities scattered around the house. Just happy chaos until early January, though with each day that passes and with each dust pile that grows, the “happy” part is a little tougher to stomach.

My devotional this morning encouraged me to listen for God’s voice above all others, and to “be content to be a simple sheep” who listened and followed the shepherd. And that got me to thinking about my dusty chaos differently, and to see it with new eyes.

I think sometimes I lose sight of Jesus in the trappings of the season, even in my precious nativities themselves. Sometimes it is all overwhelming – the lights, the decorations, the greenery – all the beautiful things that delight the senses can also overpower the senses. Not to mention all the time spent fussing over them, setting things up to look beautiful, which, if I am honest, often takes away from the time spent enjoying them.

I long to be a “simple sheep” and this feels like the perfect year to try to be just that. When I think of the humble stable where our Lord was born, in a crazy way, right now I can relate! God entered this world in such a simple, quiet way, and yet when He did, everything changed. We can try to be simple sheep, but He is certainly never a simple shepherd. His love for us is

wonderfully deep and complex and life-altering, and it offers us the chance to share that amazing love with others.

My quest this Advent season is to seek and appreciate simplicity more, and to find Jesus in its midst, because I trust He is there. He never needed the fanfare of my decoration, candles and greenery anyway – He just wants space in my heart. I will set out one of my nativities on a corner of a table somewhere, and really see the miracle it depicts. I will light one candle and ponder its glow, and pray to be part of the hope that light offers our broken, hurting world.

Oh, Lord, help me to be a simple sheep... and thank you for being my Shepherd.

–Tina Robinson

December 11



The Church of the Nativity is a favorite place for pilgrims to come kneel on their journeys to the Holy Land. This photo was taken on a visit to Bethlehem in 2013 by Rev. Ron Foster.

In each heart lies a Bethlehem,
 an inn where we must ultimately answer
 whether there is room or not.
When we are Bethlehem-bound
 we experience our own advent in his.
When we are Bethlehem-bound
 we can no longer look the other way
 conveniently not seeing stars,
 not hearing angel voices.
We can no longer excuse ourselves by busily
 tending our sheep or our kingdoms.
This Advent let's go to Bethlehem
 and see this thing that the Lord has
 made known to us.
In the midst of shopping sprees
 let's ponder in our hearts the Gift of Gifts.
Through the tinsel
 let's look for the gold of the Christmas Star.
In the excitement and confusion, in the merry chaos
 let's listen for the brush of angels' wings.
This Advent, let's go to Bethlehem
 and find our kneeling places.

—"In Search of Our Kneeling Places" by Ann Weems

December 12

It's late. It's dark in my house with only the faint glow of my digital clock, which reads 2:40 a.m. It might as well say 7:00 a.m. because sleep eludes me. I can't get out of my head. My stomach is in knots. I'm so worried. I'm fraught. There is no way out. I feel so alone. I will be found out.

Have you ever found yourself in over your head? Out of your depth? Sometimes, despite our best intentions we can find ourselves overcome with self-doubt and driven by self-preservation at any cost. This plight is especially the case when we have messed up and left the trustworthy, narrow path to find our own way. In turn, we are led to a place of deep anxiety, fear, and isolation. Taking up residence in this place of darkness is our undoing. The Psalmist knows this place—intimately. However, the Psalmist also knows that God is the only sure thing. God is relentless in God's pursuit of us. With pure love, grace, mercy, power, and strength, God rescues us, redeems us, and sustains us through God's own son. We have a way out and a way through in Christ. Christ is our assurance that we are in fact never alone and always welcome, even if we have gone rogue. As we wait, we hope. We hope because we are lavishly loved.

*We wait upon you, Christ our Lord
for you come in love,
you come in peace,
and you come for us.*

*Grant us courage oh long expected One,
for you are the fulfillment of our hoping.
In the name of the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sustainer,
Amen.*

—Rev. Melanie Kim Hamill

December 13

Christmas Memory

Everyone has those Christmas memories and traditions that will always be held near and dear to your heart. For me there are many, but one stands out. My parents have an annual Christmas party every year the weekend before Christmas. Everyone looks forward to this treasured gathering. I remember one year when I was a kid growing up in the mountains of far western Maryland. It was the weekend before Christmas and time for the party. Everyone still lived relatively close by in the area. We were all excited to spend time with each other catching up, laughing, and rejoicing over the joys of the season.

It just so happened that we had recently gotten back-to-back snowstorms that year. My parents, brothers, and I were sure no one would be able to make it to the party through two feet of fresh snow. When it was time for the party, we thought no one would show up. All of a sudden, there was a knock at the door. A neighbor showed up with a few goodies for the party! Over the next hour, more and more knocks came with neighbors and friends from all over town at our door. They had made the trek by foot on this cold, snowy night to be with us. We had the best time that year sharing a cold, snowy night with loved ones. I will always remember that Christmas party and how thankful I am for my family, friends, and kind deeds during this advent season and everyday throughout the year.

–Ashley Jewell

December 14

Take Time To Be Holy

There is a wonderful old hymn that begins “Take time to be holy.” There is no better time than the Advent season to remember these words. Advent is a wonderful time of year in the life of a Christian. It is a time when we look back and remember the birth of our Savior; and it is a time when we are reminded of his promise to return. Advent is a season of anticipation. Christmas is just around the corner. Christmas means presents; presents mean shopping. Retailers have already decorated for the holiday. Stores are crowded with shoppers looking for the perfect gift. It is time to put up the tree, decorate the house, bake cookies, wrap presents, prepare the guest room; busy, busy, busy.

Is anyone taking time to be holy? The Apostle Peter wrote these words; “Prepare your minds for action, discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring when He is revealed... for it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’”
(1 Pet 1:13-16)

To be holy is to be consecrated to God. John Wesley understood this to mean an inward and outward holiness of heart. Inward holiness begins with the transforming grace of Christ. Outward holiness is walking as Jesus walked. There is no better time in the Christian year than now to express the holiness of heart and action that springs from the love of Jesus. We love because He first loved us.

This Advent season amid the hustle and bustle, take time to be holy.

–Jim Pugh

December 15

Matthew 24:36-44

“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

Advent is a time of refocusing. As we marvel at the wondrous act of God coming to us, our marvel silences us, silences our own expectations and opens our eyes to God’s unexpected and surprising work in our midst. As we read the gospel, our initial response may be of dismay. “About the day and the hour, no one knows...” God’s judgment does not seem merciful at all but rather arbitrary and unfair. But perhaps we are looking at this passage from the perspective of our own anxiety: am “I” to be taken or left behind? The gospel however refocuses the question: this is not about God’s judgment of which we can know nothing but about our own inability to judge. None of our communities are perfect, none of us are perfect (to know the hour). None of us are given the right to judge. Rather, as we wait, we are always humbly and simply neighbors one to another

God, in our waiting, help us to let go of our own anxieties, knowing that you are ever merciful. Amen

—from Luther Seminary

December 16

Tradition

One of the great traditions in the Ferrell home has been the placing of baby Jesus in the nativity set first thing on Christmas morning. Aside from the cup of coffee or spiced tea, nothing else could happen until baby Jesus was where he belonged, and where his place had been saved since we set it up in early Advent. My parents had cleverly figured out a way for my sister and I to alternate years so we would always know whose year it was to place Jesus in the manger and avoid an early Christmas morning argument. It was a special moment then and it still is today.

It was also special when I learned why that tradition was so important. How easy would it be to get all into opening presents and eating Christmas breakfast and putting on new clothes to go to Grandma's and forget why we were doing this in the first place? But we started Christmas Day with the truly most important thing: Jesus. This tradition taught me to never doubt that He was the center of our day and the reason we even gave gifts to each other. He came first then, and he needs to be first every day and in all circumstances.

I'm very thankful for this particular tradition because I have never lost the real focus of this celebration. This would be my year to do it, but now Beth and I both let our daughters have the honor so they can see what this family and Christmas are all about!

–Tricia Ferrell

December 17

There I Am

When our oldest daughter, Christine, was four she landed the part of Mary in the Reisterstown UMC Pre-School Christmas pageant. It probably didn't hurt that her dad was one of the pastors, but I swear I had nothing to do with the casting. In any event, she turned out to be an excellent choice and took her role quite seriously.

She couldn't wait for the final performance where she would get to wear the traditional blue costume and walk with Joseph hand in hand to try to find a place at the inn. The pageant was narrated entirely by one of the teachers, so she had no lines to learn. But that doesn't mean she didn't spend a lot of time and thought preparing for her big part. In fact, I remember more about that than I do about the actual pageant.

That December, we would regularly drive around our neighborhood to take in the Christmas lights adorning our neighbors' homes. And whenever we came upon a house that had a Nativity scene out front, Christine would point to Mary and say rather matter-of-factly, "There I am." Talk about living into a part!

I thought then, and I often think now, that Christine was on to something significant about the Christmas story. You see, there's quite a lot of glitter and frantic activity that threatens to distract and remove us from this amazing narrative of God's salvation. But isn't the goal of Christmas to find a way to not just hear this old, old story again but to really inhabit it? Every year since Christine got to be Mary, I have longed for the innocence of my four year old daughter to be able to gaze at the Nativity scene and say, "There I am."

—Rev. Ron Foster

December 18

Not celebrate?

Your burden is too great to bear?

Your loneliness is intensified during this Christmas season?

Your tears seem to have no end?

Not celebrate?

You should lead the celebration!

You should run through the streets

to ring the bells and sing the loudest!

You should fling the tinsel on the tree,

and open your house to your neighbors,

and call them in to dance!

For it is you above all others

who know the joy of Advent.

It is unto you that a Savior is born this day,

One who comes to lift your burden from your shoulders,

One who comes to wipe the tears from your eyes.

You are not alone.

for he is born this day to you.

–“Not Celebrate?” from *Kneeling in Bethlehem* by Ann Weems

December 19



Joyful Mystery #1: Annunciation
art by Jim Janknegt

December 20

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

O come, O come, Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free thine own from Satan's tyranny
From depths of Hell Thy people save and give them victory
o'er the grave
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, Thou Day-Spring, come and cheer our spirits by Thine
advent here
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night and death's dark shadows
put to flight.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, Thou Key of David, come, and open wide our
heavenly home;
Make safe the way that leads on high, and close the path
to misery.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, O come, Thou Lord of might, who to Thy tribes,
on Sinai's height,
In ancient times did'st give the Law, in cloud, and majesty
and awe.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

—United Methodist Hymnal, #211

December 21

Advent Credo

It is not true that creation and the human family are doomed to destruction and loss—

This is true: For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life;

It is not true that we must accept inhumanity and discrimination, hunger and poverty, death and destruction—

This is true: I have come that they may have life, and that abundantly.

It is not true that violence and hatred should have the last word, and that war and destruction rule forever—

This is true: Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, his name shall be called wonderful councilor, mighty God, the Everlasting, the Prince of peace.

It is not true that we are simply victims of the powers of evil who seek to rule the world—

This is true: To me is given authority in heaven and on earth, and lo I am with you, even until the end of the world.

It is not true that we have to wait for those who are specially gifted, who are the prophets of the Church before we can be peacemakers—

This is true: I will pour out my spirit on all flesh and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions and your old men shall have dreams.

It is not true that our hopes for liberation of humankind, of justice, of human dignity of peace are not meant for this earth and for this history—

This is true: The hour comes, and it is now, that the true worshipers shall worship God in spirit and in truth.

So let us enter Advent in hope, even hope against hope. Let us see visions of love and peace and justice. Let us affirm with humility, with joy, with faith, with courage: Jesus Christ—the life of the world.

—From *Testimony: The Word Made Flesh*, by Daniel Berrigan, S.J. Orbis Books, 2004.

December 22

Like Christ

Children like to send letters to Santa, listing all the many toys, games, and electronic devices they would like to receive on Christmas morning. The more the merrier.

We are all like that. We adults have insatiable wants. We never have enough. If we live in a mansion we want a bigger mansion, or at least the addition of a new sunroom. If we have a nice car, we want a fancier, more luxurious car, and maybe two or three. No matter how large our portfolio of stocks, we want more to add to our assets.

Our problem is not that we want too much. Our problem is that we want too little.

We are satisfied with material possessions when we could have riches that this world cannot take away. We are content with mediocrity, when greatness is within our reach. We cheat ourselves when we do not strive to become the very noblest and highest that we can be. We settle for being like everyone else, when we could be like Christ.

The purpose of the Christian Church is to make people like Christ. All the sermons and liturgies and candlelight services will mean nothing if we fail in that attempt. To make me like Christ. To make you like Christ.

To be like Christ is not simply to avoid the glaring sins and scandalous behavior. It is more than being a nice guy or a decent woman. To be like Christ is to allow Christ to work through our human lives, so that we say what Christ would say and do what Christ would do. To be like Christ is to be set free from the worry of how we shall survive from day to day and trust in the God

who will provide. It is to be healed from the poison of vengeful bitterness and to live in peace and harmony with others. It is to love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and to love your neighbor as yourself.

It does not matter what you have been in the past. It does not matter what sin you have committed, what broken relationships you have suffered, what disappointments you have known, what failures you have experienced. Even now you can choose to be like Christ, to accept his grace, and to begin to walk in the fullness of life that he freely offers to all.

To be like Christ – why would you settle for anything less?

–Rev. Byron Brought

December 23

Bethlehem, a city in what is modern day Palestine, wasn't so much different than the world we live in now. Sure, I know our nativities are pretty and the decorations fancy and bright, but it wasn't the case in the setting by which our Savior came into the world. Bethlehem was far from what some of our most famous Christmas carols depict. It was a dark and crowded, a hustling and bustling place.

Dr. Mitri Raheb, a Pastor and President of one of the leading Christian organizations in Palestine writes:

“When Christians today sing ‘O little town of Bethlehem’ they seldom think of the real city with the real people. When it comes to Bethlehem and to Christmas, Christianity has become so spiritualized and so commercialized. It’s all about Santa, the Tree, the gifts, and the food. But what happened in Bethlehem 2000 years ago was something real. Jesus was born as a refugee. His family was forced to leave Nazareth and go to Bethlehem. Later his family had to flee the brutality of King Herod and go into hiding in Egypt for two years. Today Bethlehem has almost 20,000 Palestinian refugees who lost in 1948, when the State of Israel was established, their land, homes and belongings and came to Bethlehem seeking refuge. They are still living in three refugee camps waiting for a just solution.”

There was no room for Jesus' family. It wasn't like people were opening their doors offering the hospitality so many of us are privileged to receive. Bethlehem wasn't rolling out the red carpet. There was no VIP treatment. I would imagine the stable stinky and gross. I can still smell that pungent odor of urine and manure, as I used to help my grandfather separate livestock on our family ranch in Texas... not the ideal setting for the birth of the Savior of the world.

And yet the scriptures tell us Jesus is “the Light of the World” over and over. Could there be a more dark and broken setting for the light to come into?

Our world today is not so different. We are a hustle and bustle society of doing and getting. It is not easy to see beyond our own pursuit of success and personal gratification the multitudes in our world homeless, hungry, and alone. There is war. There is hate. There is division. There is sickness. There is death.

But there is still, was then, and will always be...JESUS.

May His light shine bright in each of us this season. May we love one another and provide the hospitality, service, and kindness that even our Savior was denied at the time of His birth.

We were all refugees, lost and homeless before Christ rescued us and claimed us for His own. Shine your light brighter than those Christmas decorations and be reminded of the love God must have for each of us to send His son, born in darkness, to die on the cross so that we might live.

–Chris Dillard

December 24

A Proud Parents' Christmas

In December of 1995, our son, Josh, was 6 years old. Our next door neighbor, Fred, asked Josh to pick up his newspaper and put it behind a bush on his front porch while he was away. When Mr. Fred returned a few days later, he gave Josh a \$10 bill for his services. This was the first money he ever earned. When we went to church the Sunday before Christmas, the offering plate was being passed down our pew and (to our surprise) when it came to Josh, he pulled out the \$10 bill, lovingly placed it in the plate, and said, "I want to give this to the poor." We both were touched to tears but also beamed with pride. We were reminded of the scriptures "...a little child shall lead them." His act of kindness reminded us that giving is not just at Christmas, but all year long and from the heart!

—Lou and Kathie Kamm

December 25: Luke 2:1-20

1 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 All went to their own towns to be registered. 4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 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.

8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

14 “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

15 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.” 16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

