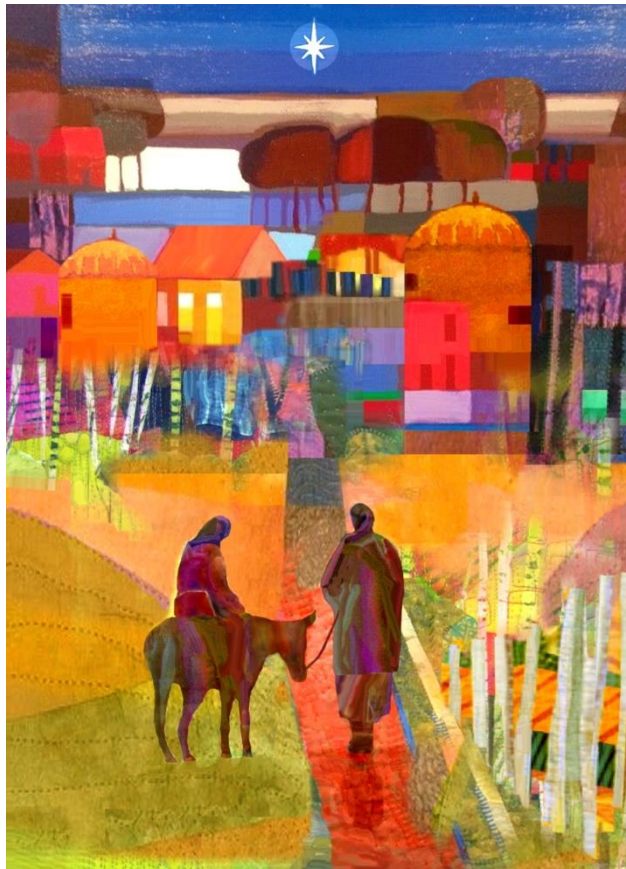


# *Traveling the Road Called Hope*

*“I ask that your minds may be opened to see his light,  
so that you will know what is the hope to which he has called you.”*

*Ephesians 1:18, Good News Bible*



A Fernwood Advent Devotional Guide  
December 2024



# *Traveling the Road Called Hope*

Advent 2024

*“I ask that your minds may be opened to see his light,  
so that you will know what is the hope to which he has called you.”*

Ephesians 1:18, *Good News Bible*

The Christmas season includes lots of travel. Cross town and cross country. Trips to the mall and trips to homes of family and friends. Often it will take planes, trains and automobiles to get us where we want to go. Sometimes our journeys may only require a pair of warm socks and shoes as we stroll next door to share holiday cheer with neighbors. At other times, we'll pack the car with suitcases and presents to travel “home” for the holidays.

But no matter where or how far we journey, all of us will spend some part of the holiday traveling on a road called hope.

We know this road well. It's a path that winds around our hearts. It's the road that is paved with a longing that we carry in us all year long. But a longing that always seems strongest at the holidays.

We are not alone in our journey. The Christmas story is told by all kinds of travelers on the road called hope. Ancient prophets imagine a new home while traveling the road to and from exile. Angels journey from heaven to earth to deliver hopeful messages. Joseph and Mary travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem, Joseph's ancestral home. Weather-beaten shepherds wander a dirt road that leads from the fields to a stable. And later, Magi from the East traipse across the desert in search of the one “born king of the Jews.” They all come together in Bethlehem where they discover God has chosen earth — and the human heart — to be God's own home.

Members of the Fernwood family of faith have their own stories of traveling that well-worn road. Together with the familiar faces of Christmas, we are all invited to travel the road called hope together. To help you navigate your way, I invite you to read the enclosed devotionals like a travel map to guide your journey. And remember, such trips are always made more meaningful when we travel with good companions. So take time to gather this season with the rest of your family of faith in worship.

This season let's take a trip once again to Bethlehem, our heart home. That little out-of-the way place of wonder that can only be reached by traveling the road called hope. And as we travel there, “may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15:13).

With hope,



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# Advent at Fernwood

December 1 - December 24

## December 1 — First Sunday of Advent: *Hope*

**Message: “Longing for Hope, Yearning for Home”**

(Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:25-36)

*Advent always begins with a jolt. This week, Jesus describes scenes of life being upended and people thrown into chaos — images that are all too familiar to us today. Such times make us homesick as we begin to realize how far from home we feel. It is with this deep longing that the Christmas story begins. For none other than God hears the human cry for help and hope.*

*And makes a plan to bring us home again.*

## December 8 — Second Sunday of Advent: *Peace*

**Message: “You Can’t Get There from Here”**

(Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-7)

*To go home again is to admit we are dissatisfied with where we are now living. Going to a new place requires we leave the old. So we repent — we turn from one way toward another. We change directions in order to change addresses. John the Baptist understood the importance of repentance to any life change. He encouraged all of us who want because it means we believe God is not finished with us yet.*

*What changes do we wish to make in our lives in order to find our way home?*

## December 15 — Third Sunday of Advent: *Joy*

**Message: “Do You Know How to Get to...”**

(Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18)

*Even with GPS on our phones we sometimes get lost. So it’s a wise move to pull over and ask directions. John the Baptist also suggests some sign posts to look for that will remind us we’re on the right road — generosity, kindness, sharing. Simple things that we learned from our earliest days at home. Perhaps the best way forward is to go back to where we first began. As the poet E.E. Cummings wisely noted, “the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.”*

## December 22 — Fourth Sunday of Advent: *Love*

**Message: “Come in! We’ve Been Waiting for You!”**

(Micah 5:2a-5a; Psalm 80:1-7; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-55)

*When the angel Gabriel first visited Mary to tell her that she would become pregnant, she opened the door to her home and her heart. Which, in turn, allowed her to open her heart and life to Jesus. As she sings with joy, she finds her heart being opened even wider to all kinds of people — the poor, the hungry, the hopeless. She must have sung that song often in her life because Jesus also sang it everywhere He went. Throughout His life and ministry, Jesus constantly made room for others. This season we’re reminded that home is the place we belong. We have a room in the house and a place at the table. And we know we’re home at last because the face that welcomes us is the face of love.*

## Family Caroling and Chili Dinner / 4:00 p.m. – 7:00 p.m.

*Meet at the church in the dining hall. We will go caroling and then return to share chili. Open to all church family.*

*Please sign up on the information table.*

# *Christmas Season at Fernwood*

*The Twelve Days of Christmas invite us to spend time getting to know the Christ child born to us and for us. Enjoy time with family and friends, and reflect on the mystery that “the Word became flesh and lived among us.”*



**Tuesday, December 24 / 5:00 p.m.**

***Christmas Eve Candlelight Service***

***“Holding Hope in Our Hands”***

(Luke 2:1-20)

**December 29 — *First Sunday of Christmas***

**Message: *“A New House Guest”***

(Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Psalm 147:13-21; Galatians 3:21-25; 4:4-7; John 1:1-18)

*John takes the birth of Jesus to new heights. Jesus is “the Word” who becomes flesh and “moves into the neighborhood.” And really, into our lives. Christ takes up residence with us and in us, a permanent house guest who longs to share life with us and bring light to us.*

**January 5 — *Second Sunday of Christmas/12<sup>th</sup> Day of Christmas***

**Message: *“Stars Beneath Our Feet”***

(Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 147:12-20; Ephesians 1:3-14; Matthew 2:1-15, 19-23)

*Matthew tells how the Magi found their way to Jesus by following a star. We know there are stars that shine above us. But we would do well to remember they are also shining beneath us, guiding our steps and leading to us to discover Jesus in new ways. Leading us to new epiphanies this year. So, on this first Sunday of a new year, we choose our own “star words” to bring light into our lives and guide us in new paths throughout the year ahead.*



*Note: The church office will be closed Tuesday, December 24 and Wednesday, December 25 of Christmas week, as well as January 1 for New Year’s Day..*

*Staff will be on call each of the days and will respond to your calls or questions.*





“And there will be

strange signs in the sun,

moon, and stars.

And here on earth, the nations

will be in turmoil...

...stand and look up,

for your salvation is near!”

—Luke 21:25-28, *New Living Translation, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*

First Sunday of Advent

*Hope*

**Sunday, December 1**

**Sunday Readings:** *Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:25-36*

**Today's Reading:** *"The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world"* (John 1:9, *Modern English Version*).

### **The Advent Wreath**

As is with many people, I have very fond childhood memories of decorating the house in preparation for Christmas. This included the annual pilgrimage to find and bring back a beautiful tree, pulling out all of the boxes of decorations from the attic, going through each of the ornaments — many of which were homemade — and reminiscing about when they were added to the family collection.

After the tree was secured in its stand and the sparkly skirt that mom had made and embellished with sequins was put into place, dad would wrap the tree in colored lights. Then, we children would take turns hanging our favorite ornaments and when they were all proudly displayed, we'd add strands of tinsel. This whole process took all day and when we were done, dad would turn the regular indoor lights off and the tree lights on, and we would just look at the spectacle and marvel. It wasn't just beautiful, it was magical.

But the most special of all Christmas decorations was the Advent wreath, which was set up on our dining room table. Each Sunday, we'd light one, two, three, then four white candles, and reflect on what we'd learned about its significance earlier that day in church. I remember being so excited as the weeks drew near to Christmas, when we'd finally light the special red candle in the middle.

Since then the Advent wreath also functioned as a centerpiece, each candle lighting was followed by a prayer of thanksgiving and a delicious meal that mom (and I, when I was older) had prepared for the occasion. This always included rhubarb custard pie for dessert, which was special because we only ever had it on Sundays and holidays.

I suppose as a kid I was also excited to open presents. But for many years now, my fondest memories are of the Advent wreath and the joy it brought as we anticipated and celebrated the birth of the precious baby Jesus and all that his life (and subsequent death) means to us as Christians. And those feelings have only grown as I get older. Any time I see the lighting of a candle in an advent wreath, I can't help but smile and be reminded of the power of God's love for us all.

—*Nancy Kay*



**Monday, December 2**

*Today's Reading: "This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it" (Psalm 118:24, King James Version).*

### *The Gifts of Home and Family*

Christmas came early in December 1979. On December 3 of that year, Randy and I became a family for the first time. Randall Clayton (Clay) Gardner weighed in at 7lb. 14oz., and we were overjoyed. We had read lots of parenting books, but we didn't have a clue about being parents. Fortunately, my parents and Randy's mother were at the parsonage in Meadowview, VA as we arrived home from the hospital. How proud we were to have a son and how glad to have some help! I mentioned earlier we didn't have a clue what we were doing.

All was going well as a young family, until I was standing in the kitchen preparing a sandwich while Clay was sleeping, and then I suddenly dropped to the floor. I dislocated my knee. Sliding on the floor, I made it to the phone and called a friend, Joan, who came to my rescue. Joan called many of our church families until she found Randy visiting with a shut-in couple. Joan was able to take care of Clay while Randy took me to the ER. Just a few weeks after Clay's birth, and now I'm on crutches.

Our planned Christmas to be alone on Christmas morning with our newborn son, and then join our extended family later Christmas Day didn't seem realistic. We needed help. We would leave for Gaffney after the Christmas program on Sunday night and arrive home earlier than planned. How exciting it was to share our son with his grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and new friends!

Little did we know that there would be so many more Christmas holidays laughing, rejoicing, grieving, and crying with family and friends: The first Christmas as a family of four after Clay's birth, the first Christmas after Randy's mother died, and then a few short years later the Christmas without Randy's dad, the Christmas when our daughter-in-law joined the family, the same Christmas when Clay was in Afghanistan and my daddy had died a few months earlier, the Christmas when our son-in-law joined the family, the first Christmas as grandparents, the Christmas when Clay made it home from his deployment to Kuwait on Christmas Eve. Then there were the Christmases without Randy's brother and my mother, and then the saddest Christmas for me in 2022 when Randy was no longer alive on this Earth. This list was full of joyous times and sad times, but there were always reasons to be thankful for home and family.

— Sara Gardner

**Tuesday, December 3**

**Today's Reading:** *"Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' 14Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt"* (Matthew 2:13-14, *New Revised Standard Version*).

### ***Welcome Home***

When our second child was born, Gerald, our three-year-old daughter Stephanie, and I were living in Louisville, Kentucky. Gerald had just completed his PhD and had accepted a position with the Missouri Baptist Convention that would allow him to teach religion courses at the University of Missouri through the Baptist Student Union. There he would also assist with Campus Ministry. Did I mention that I was pregnant?

It was two weeks past my due date, and we were in the process of packing for the move to Columbia, Missouri. As luck would have it, the baby decided to make her appearance on the day the movers came to pack our household goods. Gerald and I left Stephanie with our next-door neighbors, who would also supervise the packing, and we headed to the hospital. In the meantime, my parents, who lived in Huntsville, Alabama, were on their way to Louisville to take Stephanie home with them.

Allison arrived safely on that Wednesday. Unfortunately, Gerald was committed to taking a group of students to Glorieta Baptist Assembly in New Mexico for Student Week and was to leave from Columbia on the following Monday. Not a problem, we thought. Stephanie was happy with her grandparents, Allison and I would stay with our next-door neighbors (who had been close friends six of our seven Seminary years), and Gerald would go on to Missouri. Then, when the doctor released Allison and me to travel, my dad would return to Louisville and take us to Huntsville. I felt bad that Gerald would miss the early days of Allison's life, but the plan was that my dad had vacation time scheduled for a couple of weeks later and he and my mom would drive the girls and me to Missouri.

Well, you know what they say about best laid plans ... My dad's vacation was postponed due to a work-related issue, so we settled in for a bit longer. A month later, the stars aligned, and we were able to make the drive to Missouri, completing our circuitous journey. We were not fleeing anyone or anything, but it was a new beginning for us as a family and it was wonderful to finally be home.

— *Sharon Keown*

**Wednesday, December 4**

**Today's Reading:** *"A voice cries out:*

*"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*

*4Every valley shall be lifted up,  
and every mountain and hill be made low;  
the uneven ground shall become level,  
and the rough places a plain.*

*5Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,  
and all flesh shall see it together,*

*for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."...". (Isaiah 40:3-5, New Revised Standard Version).*

"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children" (Galatians 4:4-5, *New Revised Standard Version*).

### *Journey to Home*

Christmas Day was a beautifully wrapped gift; family, stories, laughter, warm hugs, a table of mouth-worthy dishes, tinsel-draped tree, excitement and children's anticipation of opening presents. In the morning, my parents, older sister, Melinda, and younger brother, Richie, and I would travel from Kingsville to Hebbronville or Benavides, small towns in south Texas. Like clockwork, my paternal grandmother and great aunt alternated being the hostess on either Christmas or Thanksgiving. We opened our gifts, gathered round the table, gave thanks, and enjoyed every bite – especially the divinity fudge.

By mid-afternoon, another round of excitement and anticipation fell upon us as we waved good-bye from rolled down windows in the car and headed north to San Antonio, where my maternal grandparents awaited us. How fortunate I was to see both sets of grandparents on Christmas Day! Traveling from small towns like Hebbronville and Benavides to the big city of San Antonio stretched my world and filled me with wonder. Each trip carved out a greater sense of home and a bigger container for love.

As an eight-year-old, I had never heard the phrase, "in the fullness of time." Looking back at this Christmas I know now it was exactly that for my family. Our time together was ripe with all good things: home, family and love. Two months later, my father died and as his heart stopped, it left gaping holes in mine. I have been journeying home ever since.

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his son, Jesus, showing the journey from the wilderness to His glory.

— *Martha Rentz*

**Thursday, December 5**

**Today's Reading:** *"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given."* – (Isaiah 9:6, *King James Version*).

***It's a Birthday Party!***

I have two wonderful sons, David and Rush. They are seven years apart, but on the calendar, there are only 18 days between them. And guess whose birthday is right smack in the middle? You guessed it, JESUS!!!

So, these are the birthdays: David 12/14, Jesus 12/25 and Rush 01/02. Therefore, in our home, the dining room had zero Christmas decorations and ALL birthday decorations.

Leaving all that we had ever known here in the sunny South and moving to a strange land called Shaker Heights, Ohio, brought about all sorts of new and exciting experiences. The Shaker Heights population is largely Jewish and the adjacent city, Beachwood, where our youngest went to school, was 97.5 percent Jewish.

One of the new things I learned about Christmas Day in a Jewish area is that it is (felt to be) THE MOST BORING DAY OF THE YEAR. No gifts given and no stores were open. There was nothing to watch on TV either. And somewhere between 5 and 7, the entire family goes to eat Chinese food, AGAIN.

About two years in, right after David's birthday, one of David's football teammates announced he was coming over for Christmas. His rationale was he practically lived with us anyway, so what was one more day? The word spread that Mama Bear(d) said it was ok to come over for Christmas.

Around 12:30 or 1:00, they started piling in. That first year, it was about 7 or 8 kids. We stayed in the dining room and celebrated Jesus' birthday. We had cake and ice cream, Christmas cookies, balloons, noise makers, the whole birthday deal. The only casualty was one dining room chair. And that was the year we started having Chinese with our neighbors and friends.

The tradition continued, the crowd waxed and waned, but everyone knew where they were welcome on a BORING Christmas Day.

This year, I plan to go back for Christmas and the word is already out – it's Birthday party time! The door is open; come on home to join your Christmas Day family!

— *Peggy Beard*

**Friday, December 6**

**Today's Reading:** *"So now you Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens along with all of God's holy people. You are members of God's family. 20Together, we are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself. 21We are carefully joined together in him, becoming a holy temple for the Lord. 22Through him you Gentiles are also being made part of this dwelling where God lives by his Spirit"* (Ephesians 2:19-22, *New Living Translation*).

### ***Home Away from Home***

Coming home implies that you've been somewhere and are now coming back to someplace else, presumably where you live or have lived before. But I found that coming home can actually happen away from home!

Quite a few years ago, I went to a work conference in Portsmouth, Virginia. I decided to go to a local church on Sunday morning. It was an Episcopal church, with which I'm not very familiar. Episcopalians celebrate communion every Sunday, but that Sunday happened to be World Communion Sunday. I had never given World Communion very much thought before, despite having participated in it probably almost my whole life. But there, in a church away from home, sitting by myself, not knowing anyone else in that building, I was reminded that I was at home. I was among my family of believers.

On that one day, almost everywhere on the globe, as the sun crossed over each town, communion was being celebrated by Christians everywhere. Despite being lonely and away from home, I still felt the presence of God's family with me.

Let us remember that all who proclaim Christ as their savior are a part of our family, no matter where they live, what they look like, or who they love.

At the communion table, all barriers are broken down.

At the communion table, we are all siblings.

— Penny Ginn

**Saturday, December 7**

**Today's Reading:** *"My people will live in peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, in undisturbed places of rest"* (Isaiah 32:18, *New International Version*).

### ***The "Home"***

In April of this year, a catastrophic hailstorm destroyed our roof and gutters. After six weeks of haggling with our insurance company, we were able to have the roof and gutters replaced. In May, I decided to repair and repaint the back deck of our home in Rock Hill, SC. I've done it before. I was younger when I did it before.

Oh...the deck looks nice, but it cost me six physical therapy sessions to get my back fixed. I have since decided that I'm done with home projects. Then came an expensive repair on the irrigation system, followed by the annual termite control contract. And, of course, the grass has to be cut, along with other chores of maintaining a home.

So, Diana and I decided we were both ready to get out from under the burdens of home ownership. On September 18<sup>th</sup>, we moved into Park Pointe Village, a continuing-care retirement community where I was the chaplain from 2012 to 2022. Yep...that's right...we moved into the "old folks' home" or simply the "home"!

We moved from our home in Rock Hill to the "home," and when it's our time, we'll move to our eternal home.

Our new home at the "home" is an apartment about one-half the square footage of our former home. Downsizing (or rightsizing) and simplifying has been good for us. We are grateful for the peace of mind and sense of security living at Park Pointe Village offers.

I write of this major transition in our lives to communicate that, for me, "home" is not only a place. It's a feeling...a sense of something good...an awareness of security and safety. "Home" is simple, uncomplicated, not burdensome. Inasmuch as any of us can know something for sure, "home" is knowing you're in the right place. Our transition to a retirement community has evoked these feelings and thoughts about "home."

I have similar feelings during the Advent and Christmas seasons. Advent is a journey home. Christmas is a homecoming where everything is right and good and comfortable and simple and safe and secure and holy. To adapt the words of Isaiah to this season, Christmas is like living in "peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, in undisturbed places of rest."

May it be so for each of us...

— *Randy Wright*

He is a voice  
shouting

in the wilderness,

“Prepare the way  
for the Lord’s coming!

Clear the road

for him!”

—Luke 3:4, *New Living Translation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.

Second Sunday of Advent  
*Peace*

**Sunday, December 8**

***Sunday Readings:*** Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-7

***Today's Reading:*** "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! <sup>18</sup>All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: <sup>19</sup>that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:17-19, *New International Version*).

### ***A Child Changes Everything***

Christmas for me means three things: faith, family, and reconciliation. For faith, it means focusing on the birth of Jesus Christ and the hope, joy, and love it represents. When it comes to family it is the time we all spend together in fellowship and remembrance as well as celebration. Then there is reconciliation which unites the other two concepts of faith and family for me.

My fondest memories of Christmas do not come from my childhood, although I am deeply grateful for those times, but from my adulthood. More accurately, from my most recent Christmas involving my son Isaiah.

The last few Christmases have been some of the most memorable because of the loving unity Isaiah brought between our family and Moriah's. Before, there was always some tension between myself and my in-laws. Despite that, I strove to develop a respectful relationship with them and Christmas was the only time we all got together. Christmas for me was not as big of a deal as it was for Moriah. However, that changed as I began spending Christmas with her family. Despite the tension, I began to enjoy Christmas in the Oswald household.

After my mom had her strokes and was put into a nursing home it became hard for me to think back to my childhood Christmas memories. It was a hard time for me and even harder for a time when Isaiah was born because my mom's short-term memory was failing, and she struggled to remember who Isaiah was sometimes. The same sadly was happening to Moriah's grandfather (on her dad's side) who was dealing with Parkinson's.

When Isaiah was born and brought up to Ohio for Christmas, the first thing that I clearly remember was that God blessed us with a true white Christmas. It was an amazing Christmas and seeing Isaiah being held by Moriah's parents and grandparents with the look of pure joy in their eyes was almost overwhelming. I was blessed and praised God for the love, joy, and hope Isaiah brought to our family.

Things between me and my in-laws began to change in a positive way. We still do not see eye-to-eye on everything, but there is more love and respect between us than before. What now brings me joy is seeing Isaiah being fully loved and accepted by them.

Last year was both a blessing and sorrowful. One of Moriah's aunts had passed away and her grandfather's disease had gotten worse. However, Isaiah, now one at the time, brought great joy to everyone. It was such a blessing seeing him interact with his cousins and other members of Moriah's family. He is now two and I am looking forward to seeing him playing around and bringing many smiles to the Oswald Household.

– Cedric Starr



**Monday, December 9**

**Today's Reading:** *"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. They lived in a land of shadows, but now light is shining on them. You have given them great joy, Lord; you have made them happy"* (Isaiah 9:2-3, *Today's English Version*).

*"The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it"* (John 1:4-5, *New Living Translation, Second Edition*).

### ***Light and Life***

Almost 20 years ago this month, I spent much of December visiting with my dad as he was in the last stages of liver cancer. During most of my visits, he slept, so I would work on Advent sermons. I noted in my journal how I was reading Bible passages about the birth of Christ and stories of new life while sitting next to the bed of someone at the end of life.

When dad was awake, we had some interesting and deep conversations about faith and about the meaning of Christmas. Grace was hard for dad to understand because parts of his past still haunted him. But that year, grace had become a surprising Christmas gift that came to him during his illness. Cards and calls, visits from family and friends filled dad's last days with a grace that overwhelmed him. And as the old hymn says, I could see in his face how "grace my fears relieved."

Like the shepherds, dad came to believe that God had given him a personal message that the Child born this season was really meant for him. Like the prophet Isaiah, in the darkness dad had experienced a great light. And a great joy.

That became evident as we planned his funeral one evening that Advent season. His pastor and minister of music had come to the house and dad helped to shape his own service. He even selected music that reflected his faith – including the carol *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing!* Ever since, I have been especially drawn to the final verse of the carol:

*Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace! Hail the Son of Righteousness!  
Light and life to all He brings, Risen with healing in His wings.  
Mild he lays his glory by, Born that we no more may die,  
Born to raise us from the earth, Born to give us second birth.  
Hark! The herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King."*

During one of my last visits with him before his death, my step-mother and I managed to get dad out of bed and the three of us went to the garage. As the door went up, gathered in his driveway was the brass band from his church. On that frosty December night, they serenaded dad with Christmas carols. It was as if the trumpets of heaven were blaring the Good News of a Savior's birth.

My dad wept at the thought that God had sent His only Son so that he could face an uncertain future with faith rather than fear. And on a dark December night, light and life came to us all.

— *Michael Tutterow*

**Tuesday, December 10**

**Today's Reading:** *"O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. 2O give thanks to the God of gods, for his steadfast love endures forever. 3O give thanks to the Lord of lords, for his steadfast love endures forever; 4who alone does great wonders, for his steadfast love endures forever; 5who by understanding made the heavens, for his steadfast love endures forever; 6who spread out the earth on the waters, for his steadfast love endures forever; 7who made the great lights, for his steadfast love endures forever; 8the sun to rule over the day, for his steadfast love endures forever; 9the moon and stars to rule over the night, for his steadfast love endures forever"* (Psalm 136:1-9, NRSV).

### *Yearning for Home*

As a child, my family did not travel at Christmas time. I only imagined Santa traveling around the world to bring me the one gift I was hoping to get. Christmas was a time of waiting for Santa and going to church.

When I traveled to college and thus had a semester break that coincided with the Christmas season, I was confronted with the reality that for the first time in my life, I had to travel home on a crowded bus to be with my family at Christmas. This trip in a car would take about 2 hours but on a crowded bus that made numerous stops, this became a 4-hour journey. I remember riding this crowded bus to go home; hoping I would get home safely and would not have to stand up the entire trip. I was anxious to see my family and connect with special high school friends, most of whom did not go off to college but remained at home.

My first long trip home occurred after college when I had to travel from Clinton, Iowa, to Rose Hill, N.C., to be home for Christmas. This is the farthest I have lived from my home since college. This mid-western town was full of wonderful people whom I truly enjoyed. I liked their culture, and I enjoyed my job. But as Christmas approached, I really began to recall many childhood memories and longed for the familiar and the only Christmas experience I know as our father guided us from Santa Claus to Jesus during our childhood.

Like me, my four brothers and sister were scattered across the United States and we had not been together for a year. It had been equally as long since I had seen my old high school friends. So, I planned my 18-hour trip very carefully. I only had a week including the holiday to complete my roundtrip.

So, on the first day of my travel, I left for work with a car full of gas and packed for the trip. Leaving work at 5:00 p.m., I got into my car and headed home to see mom and dad, my brothers and sister and all my friends. And of course to get some good home cooked food! My adrenaline kept me alert and full of happy thoughts as I mentally tried to schedule a time when I could see everyone I wanted to see in such a short time frame.

Eventually around midnight or 1:00 a.m., my body needed rest. So I pulled into a gas station that had closed for the night; turned off my car and took a nap (this was 1967 and no safety issues at that time). I woke up a few hours later and continued my journey home.

— Clarence Batts

**Wednesday, December 11**

**Today's Reading:** *"And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity" (Colossians 3:14, New International).*

### ***Discovering a Church "Home"***

I don't usually spend the holidays in Spartanburg. My sister's birthday is on December 21<sup>st</sup>, so I usually take that day through December 31<sup>st</sup> and I go visit my family in Hilton Head. I haven't been that fond of Christmas or the holiday season for a long time. It's hard for me to find joy during this time of year unless I'm with my family and participating in our traditions at home. These range from setting up my mother's Christmas Village, to looking at Christmas lights, to preparing our annual batch of hot apple cider with my mother and sister. Then, on December 31<sup>st</sup>, I go to my best friend's house and we celebrate Christmas with my nieces.

These moments bring a little bit of magic to the holidays that pierce through the stress and anxiety that I usually feel during this time of year. Even though I'm not in Spartanburg during this time, I do enjoy watching the Christmas Eve service online. Attending a Christmas Eve service is a tradition that my family has gotten away from, but it is good to have the opportunity to watch our services online so that in a way, I can spend the holidays with my Fernwood family as well.

The word home has many connotations for me. Home can be where you live – a place that brings comfort and safety. My main definition of "home" is a place where love resides. It's a place where I can go knowing that no matter what, I have people there who love and accept me exactly for who I am.

If you had asked me five years ago, I would never have equated "home" with the inside of a church. Before I came to Fernwood, my relationship with God was very rocky, and I was the farthest away from "home" as I could be in a spiritual sense. From the first moment that I stepped foot through the doors of Fernwood and over the five years since then, I have been swept away with how much love flows through the hearts of everyone who makes up this congregation. The love and acceptance shown by everyone here has allowed me to grow spiritually and become closer with God on a level that I never imagined. Our church is a very special church, and as has been said before – love, kindness, and empathy are built into the bones of this congregation. I have never met a group of people so willing to do for and be there for not only fellow church members, but for people in the community outside of our walls as well.

I don't think that I will ever be able to express the gratitude and appreciation that I feel knowing that I get to be a part of such a wonderful group of people. I have built so many relationships and I've been able to accomplish so many things that I never thought I'd be able to accomplish since coming to Fernwood. It is often overwhelming for me to think about.

My prayer for Fernwood is that we always continue to be a home, not only to each other, but to those who might be looking for their own spiritual home. I pray that we continue down this path of unity through the love that we show ourselves and others. I truly believe that God led me to Fernwood at exactly the right time, and I am forever grateful. Fernwood has become a true home for me, and I cherish you all more than you can ever know.

— Kari Mason

**Thursday, December 12**

**Today's Reading:** *"So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love"* (1 Corinthians 13:13, Revised Standard Version).

### ***Home on a Bus***

The year was 1974. We had only been married a couple of years and like the dutiful children we were, we felt it necessary to make the trips to be with both parents at Christmas. They lived three hours apart and we lived roughly 3-4 hours away. But we were younger then, so it really wasn't too hard. We would go to one family, spend the night, get up on Christmas morning, and open presents. Then, we would travel to the other family, open presents, spend the night and come back home. It was a crazy schedule, but, as I said, we were younger then.

But in 1974, something was different. We were at my parents in Augusta, Georgia, when we got a call from Mason's parents that his paternal grandmother had died in western Tennessee. They were flying out for the service and warned us that if we chose to come, they had learned that gas was scarce and we might not be able to get enough to return home. So, my parents took us to the Greyhound bus terminal for an all-night, cold ride on Christmas Eve.

When we arrived in Tennessee, not only was it cold, but it was raining and it never let up the whole time we were there. This was the first time I had met many of Mason's family, and with little sleep the night before and being cold and wet, I'm sure I didn't make the best impression. We made it through the service and graveside. Then it was time to board the Greyhound for the return trip.

On the way home I realized something, however. I was not spending Christmas with my family of origin, but I was home with the one I loved and the one who loved me and the one I had chosen to spend the rest of my life with. So, for many years, while our parents were still alive, we always got together sometime during the Christmas season (as well as other times throughout the year). But I always knew that if Mason and I were together, no matter where we were, I was truly home.

— *Marcia Harris*

**Friday, December 13**

**Today's Reading:** *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also"* (John 14:1-3, *New Revised Standard Version*).

### ***A Forever Home***

Jesus is "the reason for the season." His advent (coming) into the world is worthy of celebration! His coming into the world has brought to us –

A – abundant life  
D – delivery from sin  
V – victory over death  
E – everlasting life  
N – newness of life  
T – truth to live by

This is the season of advent – And we must celebrate it!

After 95 years of experiencing going home for Christmas, or of just being at home when Christmas comes around, I am now looking forward to going to my HEAVENLY HOME. I am traveling the road of HOPE; the hope that is more than wishful thinking. Christian hope is "BLESSED ASSURANCE! Jesus is mine!" He said to his disciples "I go to prepare a place for you, and if I go, I will come again and receive you unto myself so that where I am there you may be also." (John 14:2-3) Wow! Jesus has fitted me for my heavenly home, and He is going to take me home one day!

This reminds me of a story I read recently about a family who were discussing the question "What is heaven like?" The adults took their turns first and said such things as, "Heaven is like a long walk on the beach with a gentle cool breeze blowing, calm waves of the ocean lapping against the shore," etc. Another said, "Heaven is like a long hike up a mountain that is not too steep, the weather is perfect, the ferns are green, the flowers are blooming," etc. And then a young boy spoke up and said, "I'll tell you what heaven is like. It's the place where Jesus is, and you can sit in his lap any time you want to!"

Wow! That about says it for me. So, with hope in my heart, I look forward to reaching that place where Jesus is with His Father. And who knows, maybe I will sit in Jesus' lap!

— *Margaret League*

**Saturday, December 14**

***Today's Reading:** "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thessalonians 5: 16-18, New Revised Standard Version).*

### ***Travelin' Man***

One sometimes has to take a different look at their circumstances in order to successfully complete that part of their journey. Christmas Day in 1967 found me on the other side of the world from my home of record, Charleston Heights, S.C. I was on active duty with the navy aboard a rescue and salvage ship at anchor in Da Nang Harbor, South Vietnam.

The day started for one seaman by him telling his section leader that he was not going to get up just yet since it was Christmas. That went over with the section leader like a screen door on a submarine. After being threatened with a captain's mast (non-judicial punishment), the seaman changed his mind and turned to with the rest of the deck force.

The crew enjoyed a delicious Christmas dinner that afternoon. Later, Chaplain Cox, from the staff of Commander, Support Activities Da Nang, came aboard and conducted a non-denominational divine service and offered communion. The divine service was well-attended and I drank from a chalice for the first time.

After the divine service, David Ange (a.k.a. Fester), a shipmate, went up to Chaplain Cox and told him that if there was any wine left, he would be glad to accept it on behalf of the crew. I was not believing what I was hearing. Fester did not get the wine.

We weighed anchor and were enroute to Chu Lai Military Base, 51 miles down the coast from Da Nang, that night. Two days later, we left South Vietnam for good.

We welcomed in the New Year while on six days of R & R (rest and relaxation) in Hong Kong, BCC (British Crown Colony). The U.S.S. Safeguard (ARS-25) was my home for the WesPac (Western Pacific) Cruise of 1967-'68, so I made the best of that part of my journey.

Seven months later, I was one happy camper as I walked down the steps off an airplane at Charleston International Airport. My active-duty commitment to the navy was fulfilled that summer and I spent the following Christmas with my family.

— *Mason Harris*

“Because of God’s  
tender mercy,  
the light from heaven  
is about to break  
upon us,  
to give light to those  
who sit in darkness...  
and to guide us  
to the path of peace.”

—Luke 1:78-79, *NLT*

Third Sunday of Advent

*Joy*

**Sunday, December 15**

***Sunday Readings:*** Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

***Today's Reading:*** "God said, 'Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.' And it was so. <sup>12</sup>The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good" (Genesis 1:11-12, *New Revised Standard Version*).

### ***Pinecones and Christmas***

Growing up in the Lowcountry of South Carolina gave me the joy of being surrounded by long leaf pines and their very large pinecones. Even if the Christmas tree was up and decorated at my home, the decorating was not complete until the pinecones were placed on the mantle and on either side of the old *Broadman Hymnal* opened to "Joy to the World" on the piano.

When I would come home from Clemson for Christmas holidays, Moma always left the pinecone decorating to me. I can even remember making a swag for the front door with evergreens and pinecones. Each of these pinecones held winged seeds in between their wooden petals that would drop out while putting the swag together and when guests were welcomed into our home.

So let's follow the story of the Washington State gigantic sugar pinecones and their winged seeds to our beloved Fernwood Home that is now decorated for Advent. On either side of the Sanctuary, you will find three swags placed atop the garland with two giant sugar pinecones nestled in amongst the holly, berries, bows, and wheat.

And yet, another memory with pinecones ... It was like being at home for me those years of October afternoons with three of my dear Fa La La's laughing as we lovingly created and re-created these Advent swags together ... Our hope at that time was and ever since then has been that the pinecones would "show up" in the Advent decor.

Hopefully, if you have not noticed these pinecones before or if this is your first Advent at Fernwood, you will see these sugar pinecones, and remember those winged seeds that took flight in the wind that let them gently fall to the ground for Mother Nature to plant. And, she then nurtured them to grow into sugar pine trees in the understory of the giant redwoods.

My prayer is: May winged seeds, bearing the Hope of Advent, grow in your heart as you find Family at Fernwood that always welcomes you Home as we plant winged seeds of Hope together.

— *Barbara Jean Callaway*



## Monday, December 16

**Today's Reading:** *"But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought us the good news of your faith and love. He has told us also that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, just as we long to see you. 7For this reason, brothers and sisters, during all our distress and persecution we have been encouraged about you through your faith. 8For we now live, if you continue to stand firm in the Lord. 9How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? 10Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.*

*11Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. 12And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. 13And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints"* (1 Thessalonians 3:6-13, *New Revised Standard Version*).

### *Going Home for Christmas*

For seventy-two years I have been home for the holidays. This year will be no different than the last few. I will sit on my sofa beside the Christmas tree. Maybe I will listen to carols. Then I will close my eyes and allow my mind to visit some of the many memories I have of Christmases past. Probably, I will cry.

For many years I considered Hattiesburg, Mississippi to be home. My parents made that reference because both of their parents lived there – a block away from each other. We moved a lot because of Daddy's job but my grandparents' homes stayed the same. My grandparents stayed the same. The holidays were the same – aunts, uncles, and cousins. Every year they had pine Christmas trees which could be smelled all over the house. There was candy in all the candy dishes and the smells of special Christmas goodies reminded everyone of how special everything was. Going home for Christmas represented to me a generous dose of unconditional love and acceptance.

As I got older, "home" was my parents' house. The holidays included my parents, my brother and eventually his family as well as my own. There are so many memories ... One especially meaningful Christmas was the one when I actually saw my grandmother as a person with feelings and needs of her own. I was used to opening the front door of her house and immediately smelling the pine Christmas tree with decorations and always a star on the top.

That year it did not happen! I opened the door and to my amazement was a small silver aluminum tree with blue lights and lavender balls on it. I was speechless! My grandmother immediately started bragging on the new tree and commenting on how pretty it was. She obviously was very proud of it. I remained speechless. It was the ugliest Christmas tree I could imagine. Then I did something I had never done before. I lied to her! I told her how pretty I thought it was. It mattered to me that her feelings did not get hurt. That was how I rationalized the lying. Somehow, I did not think it was wrong to say it, and it made a huge impression on me.

My visits home recharge my batteries in the sense that they remind me of what I value. Unconditional love, acceptance, laughter, caring about each other .... So blessed!

— *Barbara VanDahm*

**Tuesday, December 17**

**Today's Reading:** *"Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice!"* (Philippians 4:4, *New Revised Standard Version*).

*The Gift that Keeps Giving*

In one of his children's books, C.S. Lewis, tells of the time when all the land of Narnia was under the evil spell of the wicked witch. It was winter all the time, and never Christmas! Can you imagine a winter with no Christmas? We need Christmas in our lives, not the excesses in which we get entangled, but the quiet simple joy that is there for us in every day.

My family has come to my home for Christmas for 40 years. It was in 1955 that God blessed us by trusting one of his little ones into our care. It had been a long and sometimes a hard wait for us, and we knew what a miracle that birth was. About three years later, we were blessed again with the birth of another son.

Children and Christmas naturally go together. Someone has said that the great events of this world are not battles or earthquakes or elections or thunderbolts. The great events are babies, for each child comes with a message that God is not yet discouraged with humanity, but still expects goodwill to become incarnate in each human life.

I do enjoy the beauty of the season. My senses seem to be anxious for the work out. It is so good to hear the music, to see the bright decorations, to enjoy food and fellowship with family and friends, to be a part of the special worship services of the church and to exchange gifts. What a joyous time!

If we are not very careful, though, we can feel that all the joys of Christmas are behind us after December 25. Not so! The real and lasting joy truly did come to us as a gift that first Christmas. It came in a unique and beautiful package that was the ultimate gift and was "something that we needed." Take this gift in the spirit that it was given. And enjoy!

— *Beth Jefford*

**Wednesday, December 18**

**Today's Reading:** *"But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought us the good news of your faith and love. He has told us also that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, just as we long to see you. 7For this reason, brothers and sisters, during all our distress and persecution we have been encouraged about you through your faith. 8For we now live, if you continue to stand firm in the Lord. 9How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? 10Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.*

*11Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. 12And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. 13And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints"* (1 Thessalonians 3:6-13, *New Revised Standard Version*).

### ***The Scent of Home***

When I dream of Christmas, I dream of Grandma's house. It's where I've spent almost every Christmas of my life. There are exceptions, of course, because my first was spent in a maternity ward in my mother's arms. A few years, our family Christmas happened not on the 25th, but the weekend before or after to accommodate the traveling schedules of the Oswald family diaspora.

Just the word "Christmas" conjures fond memories of our annual pilgrimage; the crunch of our family's minivan making its way up the gravel driveway after dark, the feeling of stepping out of the stale air of the minivan to inhale the musty, warm scent of the last leaves of fall decaying under the melting first snow of winter, the hiss of the back porch door and the hiss of my dad's reminder, "Grandma's sleeping, enter quietly!" I can feel the shock of the cold brick floor on my freshly freed, bare feet. I can hear the click-click-click of my suitcase rolling across that cold floor and then the bang-bang-bang as it's dragged down the stairs to the basement. I can picture my grandpa stirring in the Lazy Boy downstairs and the abashed look on my and my sibling's faces as Grandma comes out in her nightgown, sleep in her eyes, to greet her noisy visitors. I can feel the softness of her nightgown as I'm enveloped in her arms and breathe in her scent. It's the scent of home.

There is comfort in the consistency of those childhood memories. Going to Grandma and Grandpa's house for Christmas truly felt like an anchor for me, a child whose family moved frequently and whose parents cared for disadvantaged children in our home. In my younger years, many of these children had nowhere else to go for Christmas, and they feature heavily in my earliest memories. I have fond memories of us all searching for hidden Christmas stockings on Christmas morning (one time my dad hid one in the drop ceiling, and it took the older kids hours to find it). There are memories of the family gathering around the TV set to watch Home Alone I and II on New Year's Eve.

In later years, my cousins and siblings would play hide and seek in the nooks and crannies of the house, have snowball fights outside, and stay up late with our ears to the bedroom doors and vent grates attempting to eavesdrop on adult conversations. In my high school and college years, my family was introducing various foreign exchange students and my older cousins' significant others and subsequent children to our holiday traditions and learning about theirs.

As the years have gone on, some traditions have come and gone. So have people, whether by choice, life circumstance, or because the Lord called them home. My grandparents have moved. Cedric and Isaiah have joined the family. We've mourned the loss of my aunt and watched my grandfather's Parkinson's weaken his mind and body. I've had to grapple with the painful truth that our whole Oswald clan won't always gather in Millersburg, Ohio, to celebrate together. What will Christmas be without this annual pilgrimage? For me, the answer has to lie now in the continuity not of place but of family, both biological or chosen. And in the faith traditions I now pass along to my family.

— *Moriah Starr*

**Thursday, December 19**

**Today's Reading:** *"Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world"* (James 1:27, *New Revised Standard Version*).

*"For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline"* (2 Timothy, 1:7, *NRSV*).

*"And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me'"* (Matthew 25:40, *NRSV*).

### ***Bringing Home to Christmas in a War-torn Land***

I was an American Army chaplain in South Vietnam in 1968 when the North Vietnam regular army joined the Viet Cong guerillas in South Vietnam to make a large-scale offensive known as Tet. It purposely coincided with the lunar new year which was their biggest and most important celebration. It proved to be a bloody year. Orphanages in our area were overwhelmed with a flood of newly orphaned infants and children.

For the first months of the year, I diligently struggled to spread the good news of the gospel to my soldiers and the Vietnamese people. I was determined to use the power of love to keep my soldiers and their loved ones back home from drowning in the carnage. I prayerfully sought innovative ways to address that issue.

With Christmas just a few months over the horizon, the thought came to me to exploit the most powerful display of love the universe had ever known. I asked my soldiers to write home and ask their families to send wrapped Christmas gifts for us to distribute to the orphans in our area. The soldiers joyfully leapt at the opportunity. The spirit of Christmas began to reverberate through our battalion. The soldiers reported that a similar spirit was reverberating with their families across the thousands of miles back home. Soon hundreds of Christmas gifts came flooding in.

I contacted several orphanages and assigned one to each of the companies in our battalion. When the joyous Christmas day arrived, busloads of children arrived throughout the battalion. The children and staff members were treated to a nice Christmas meal. Afterwards our soldiers, some dressed in Santa outfits, distributed their gifts. On average each child received five gifts.

I watched my soldiers' countenance shift from one of ennui to joy. The power of love had rendered a powerful blow to the power of darkness. I told the battalion commander that what happened that Christmas season accomplished more than any bullets, bombs or rockets could have.

— *Jim Rentz*

**Friday, December 20**

**Today's Reading:** *“Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”* (Matthew 1:23, *New Revised Standard Version*).

### ***Building a Divine Home***

Growing up we spent Christmas Eve with my maternal grandparents. We would eat and open gifts and just talk. When I was small, we would go to their house on the 23<sup>rd</sup> and spend the night. As we got older, and my grandparents' health declined, we stopped spending the night and just spent the day of Christmas Eve. In 2009, my grandparents had to move out of their house. My grandfather died on Christmas Day.

Some years ago, I found their home on Zillow. The people who bought it had renovated it. It looked nothing like the home I remembered. It felt like they'd burned it down — and burned my memories down with it. How could a place that mattered so much to me just be gone? How could they be gone? It was actually years in the making, but, to me it felt like these people and place that were home to me just ceased to exist. Their space turned into a place that felt foreign. If this piece of home was lost, all of my homes could be lost too. Even worse, someone new could come into my home spaces and make me feel like a foreigner there. They could have different priorities than I do and change my home into a place I think is garish — maybe even vulgar.

I am writing this the week of the 2024 presidential election. I have spent most of the week feeling disgusted and angry. Like an ideology that is fundamentally selfish and cruel is coming to invade my home, harm people I care for, and return our country to the unspeakable hostilities of its past.

As Advent draws closer, I am trying to find my home in the Christmas Story. Jesus was born into a world that was hostile to him. Into the crosshairs of a murderous king who was power hungry and cruel.

Nevertheless, Jesus preached that the downtrodden are blessed. He spoke of a kingdom where the first would be last. He proclaimed that his message was not a recent development. This has always been the Divine order of things.

When I am vulnerable, the Divine can empathize. When I prioritize the needs and experiences of the vulnerable, I am working within the divine order of things. I am simultaneously dwelling in my divine home and helping my divine family build it piece by piece.

Immanuel is here. And we are home.

— *Laura Hicks*

**Saturday, December 21**

**Today's Reading:** *"The thief comes only in order to steal, kill, and destroy. I have come in order that you might have life — life in all its fullness"* (John 10:10, *Today's English Version*).

### ***Going and Being Home***

Our journey inward and outward may well complement one another. Being centered and grounded at our core is being at home within ourselves so we may find meaning, purpose, direction, joy, and empowerment in abiding relationships, important shared values and places, and faith-filled stories outside ourselves.

Being at Fernwood from 1981-1994 when Jean served on staff and again since 2014, the spirit of being at home has consistently resonated and offered for me a measure of other persons and places. The Spirit in the Fernwood story has been carried in my soul as what church really is in the integrity of integrated worship and front-line ministry as well as what it means to be at home with family.

For me the Fernwood story is nowhere more beautifully manifested than during our Christmas Eve service with shared joy, integrity, hope, support, and love. Children and youth now grown return with their families to this place where family gathers to share their memories, updates, hugs, and the like that remind us of our ongoing story of shared meaning, purpose, direction, and empowerment in Christ who taught us that His and our purpose is to bring "life in all its completeness" (John 10:10, *TEV*). Sitting together as scattered family, and yet coming together in timeless space and common focus, reminds us of the classic hymn that echoes, "Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine! This is my story!"

It is in these times that we see more fully Jesus coming to offer us health, healing, and wholeness because His body is incarnated as family with raised candles revealing the eternal hope-filled stained-glass story to a darkened world.

— *Jim Pruett*

*And Mary said,  
“My soul  
magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit  
rejoices in God  
my Savior,  
for he has looked  
with favor  
on the lowliness  
of his servant.”*

*—Luke 1:39, NRSV*

*Fourth Sunday of Advent  
Love*

**Sunday, December 22**

**Sunday Readings:** *Micah 5:2a-5a; Psalm 80:1-7; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-55*

**Today's Reading:** *"IN THE beginning God created the heaven and the earth. 2Now the earth was unformed and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters. 3And God said: 'Let there be light' And there was light. 4And God saw the light, that it was good; and God divided the light from the darkness. 5And God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day"* – (Genesis 1:1-4, *The Tanakh, Jewish Publication Society 1917*).

### ***Finding the Light***

A number of years ago, I took my family for a summer vacation in the Pennsylvania mountains. It was late at night in our cabin when I began checking on my children. All of a sudden, we lost power. The darkness was complete over the whole area. I was unfamiliar with the layout of the place and didn't want to call out and awaken everyone. For a few minutes, I placed my hands on the wall and tried to find my way to a flashlight that we had brought. It was an unnerving experience as I slowly touched the wall and bumped into various objects. Finally, I found the light and realized how threatening the darkness was and how relieved I was to dispel it.

Judaism and Christianity are faiths that emphasize light. Light as a symbol of enlightenment, light as a force that brings understanding to friends and neighbors. Ultimately, of course, light equals the energy of the sun and all the wonderful things that grow due to its power. From the Genesis account, light for the world was one of God's first creations.

This concept of light is retained in Judaism in a number of ways. One of the main features of a Jewish house of worship is called a "*Ner Tamid*" — "Eternal Light" — which is based on the days when the holy Temple stood in Jerusalem. The light symbolizes the fires used for the daily sacrifices that were offered there. Today, it symbolizes the constant acknowledgment of God's presence.

In the holiday and weekly practice of Judaism, candles are kindled. The best example of that is the Sabbath day. The holy day is inaugurated by candles being lit and blessed. As the day ends, 24 hours later, a colorful candle is also lit as we transition from the Sabbath to daily life.

Candles are lit for all holiday occasions as well. For example, on Hanukkah, which was celebrated by Jesus and his family, a Menorah is lit each night of the 8-day holiday. Similarly, this bringing light to the world via candles is one that Christians follow when they light Advent Candles.

This year, Hanukkah begins on Christmas Day evening, a rare thing. Which means the candles we all light this year can represent the hope for our world that Jews and Christians both share. The Jewish Christian Discovery Center developed the *Project Let There Be Light* campaign to encourage churches and Christians to spread the light of hope by adding a Menorah ornament to their Christmas trees.

For me, the lights are symbols of understanding, dignity and respect. These candles invite those involved in interfaith awareness to sit together to study, to converse, to break bread, and to enjoy each other's company. In a world which is often dark and divisive, like it was in that cabin so many years ago, it's so comforting to know that our new friends at Fernwood are lighting candles of friendship, peace and interfaith understanding. Happy holidays.

— Rabbi Albert Slomovitz  
Founder / Director of the Jewish Christian Discovery Center (JCDC)

**Note:** *This is a gift from Michael's friend and colleague, Rabbi Albert Slomovitz. His devotional is featured at the start of this week because this year the Jewish festival of Hanukkah begins on Christmas Day at sundown – a rare occasion when the two holidays coincide. Rabbi Slomovitz and the JCDC have provided Menorah tree ornaments for all of us to place on our Christmas trees this year!*



**Monday, December 23**

**Today's Reading:** *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also"* (John 14:1-3, *New Revised Standard Version*).

### ***Going Home for Christmas***

Shortly after graduating from college in the mid-1970s, I set out on one of the biggest adventures of my life: I was going to continue my studies at a Baptist seminary in Zürich, Switzerland! I worked hard all that summer, and saved up as much money as I could, so that I could pay for my flight and my room and board for the first year.

Living in Europe was a wonderful experience for me – studying theology and making many new friends from around the world – and I ended up living in Europe for almost nine years! As you might imagine, even though living there was an exciting experience, I was away from my home and family, and I missed them very much.

As a student I was able to get a few part-time jobs to pay for my continued expenses, and occasionally I was able to save up enough money to buy a plane ticket home to see my family. But money was tight, and I couldn't get home very often. Then one year I thought it would be fun to surprise my parents with a trip home for Christmas.

Immediately I began to save money to make this dream a reality, and I had fun imagining the look on my parent's faces when they saw me. In the early fall I wrote to my sister and her husband, telling her of my plan to surprise our parents with a visit for Christmas, and asking if they could pick me up at Kennedy Airport in New York for the big surprise.

A couple weeks later (remember, this is before email!) I got a letter from my sister telling me that they would gladly pick me up at the airport, but she also made a gentle counter suggestion: instead of surprising our parents, she thought it might be better if I told them of my plan to come home for the Holidays – that way they would have the joy of anticipation!

Her suggestion made a lot of sense to me, so I wrote to my parents, telling them of my plan to fly home for Christmas. Later on, after I had returned to Switzerland and my studies, my sister wrote to tell me how much our parents had enjoyed my visit and especially getting ready for Christmas knowing that I would be there.

— *Warren Kay*

**Tuesday, December 24 / *Christmas Eve***

***Christmas Eve Readings:*** *Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20*

**Today's Reading:** *"Weeping may endure for the night, but joy comes in the morning"* (Psalm 30:5b, *New King James Version*).

### ***Home, HOME, "Home" for Christmas***

I called Mama about 11:45 Christmas Eve night, 1998. We were excited that my limb of the family would arrive at her house, my childhood home, on Christmas Day as usual. Just hours away, and we'd be HOME for the next week!

I was beyond excited! I'd kept the secret for weeks! Kristi had called me in early November. "Mama, I have a Christmas-gift idea. You know how Grandmama hates her caregivers' cooking. She's too polite to tell them, but we hear about it! She doesn't need a gown or robe or sweater or powder or candle or lotion or candy or anything. I know her favorite recipes, and I can cook for her. Is that hokey?"

Our deep-freezer bulged with Mama's favorite meals, thanks to Kristi, who planned, purchased, cooked, packaged, labeled and froze "TV dinners" to provide Mama with occasional home-cooked treats. After a broken hip and surgery months before, Mama had recovered well but couldn't stand pain-free in one place long enough to cook for herself. Her caretakers didn't understand "Southern home cookin'," so Kristi created the perfect Christmas gift!

Randy and I and our grown kids, themselves home in Spartanburg for Christmas, lingered lazily over Christmas-morning brunch, looking at little treasures in our stockings before time to drive to North Charleston. The phone rang. "Mama's gone!" my brother croaked. Unexpectedly, she had gone "home" in her sleep.

I've never spent such a horribly surreal week than that Christmas visit HOME. Traditional extended-family Christmas dinner, gifts, and other holiday events suddenly had become interspersed with traumatizing casket selection, private family viewing, viewing for friends, and funeral. In photographs of Christmas Dinner and gift exchanging, we're all dressed in black. We'd just returned from the mortuary.

Mama's perfect Christmas gift remained in our freezer, left behind on Christmas Day with her other gifts that no longer had a recipient. But those dinners, planned and prepared and packaged with pure love, found their purpose. With Kristi's blessing, they became homemade meals for our beloved Fernwood folk who experienced traumas and joys in the year to come. When we visited a bereaved family, joyful new parents, or recuperating patients among our church family, homemade frozen meals, with all that love cooked in, became gifts to lighten their loads at least a little. A handwritten note explained their significance.

— *Diana O. Wright*

“For a child

is born to us,

a son

is given to us...

And he will be called

Wonderful Counselor,

Mighty God,

Everlasting Father,

Prince of Peace.”

—Isaiah 9:6, *NLT*

*Christmas Day*

## Wednesday, December 25 / Christmas Day

**Today's Reading:** *In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3All went to their own towns to be registered. 4Joseph 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.*

*5He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7And 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 2:1-7, New Revised Standard Version).*

### ***“Mi casa, su casa”***

I wonder whatever happened to the innkeeper? He gets a bad rap in annual church Christmas pageants. A bathrobe-clad Joseph and forlorn Mary stand knocking at the door, only to have the hard-hearted innkeeper reply, “No room in the inn.” But then, the old innkeeper relents and suggests that they could stay in the stable out back. And everyone breathes a sign of relief.

Though there was no room in the inn, Luke tells us that from His earliest moments on earth, Jesus found room for others. On the night of His birth, Jesus welcomed a rag-tag band of shepherds into His humble home. Later, it would be the Magi from the East who found a home with the one “born king of the Jews.” Hospitality was the first gift Jesus gave on the night of His birth.

One of the previous church’s I served had a large display case outside the sanctuary entrance. One year we added a ceramic nativity scene to recall Jesus’ first home. One of our mission teams brought it back from Mexico after a one-week house-building trip. The familiar cast of nativity characters had a distinct Mexican look to them.

After serving a week in Mexico, those ceramic faces took on new meaning. As I think about that Mexican crèche in the display case, I now imagine real people. When I look at the nativity figures of Mary and Jesus, I can’t help but think of Roscinda and her 18-month-old son Luis, for whom we built a cinder-block house. The block walls rose inches in front of the shack in which their family lived. Each day we arrived at the work site, Roscinda would greet us shyly, Luis in tow. She would work on some aspect of the construction, disappearing only long enough to tend the food she was cooking over a wood fire for her family’s dinner.

When our team threw a dinner party of burgers and hot dogs on our final night in Mexico, Roscinda and Luis came, too. Before she left, she asked if I was coming back with the next team. As little Luis stood by her side, she told me that when I returned, “Mi casa, su casa.” *My home is your home.*

Hospitality makes room for another and invites them in. I think about that ceramic crèche and realize that even after 2000 years, Jesus still opens His tiny home and invites us in. He still offers you and me the gift of hospitality. The only question is whether I will have the courage to return His friendship and welcome Jesus and others in the same way.

*“How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is giv’n!  
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heav’n.  
No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin,  
Where meek souls will receive Him, still the dear Christ enters in.”*

Come, Lord Jesus. *“Mi casa, su casa.”*

— Michael Tutterow

**Thursday, December 26**

**Today's Reading:** *"Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer"* (Romans 12:12, NRSV).

### *Faces of Hope*

When I agreed to submit a story for the Advent Devotional Guide, I thought it would be an easy and fun way to flex my creative muscles. Why not? I like to write and I should have lots of time due to an injury that will keep me out of commission for a while.

The theme of *"Traveling the Road Called Hope"* sounded uplifting. Family and friends ran through my head. When the assignment showed up in my email – I was still in a bit too much pain from a catastrophic fall I took after Helene to get started right away so I put it off until I felt better. Unfortunately, my journey began to take me down a darker road. The doctor warned that it would "get worse before it gets better" – and he was right. And then the election.

So I decided to try thinking of times that would lift my spirits.

When my boys were only 6, 3, and 12 months old we attended the annual Sunday School Christmas party. After our dinner and program, we awaited the arrival of Santa. We watched the faces of our little boys, dressed as shepherds – nothing more than a pillowcase tied around their heads with the belts from their little flannel robes. The expressions of wonder and hope were exquisite to see and it filled my heart with hope.

Every year our pastor took the children who were old enough out to the fields to cut down a tree for the church. We lived in northern New York. In December the temperatures could be very cold – below zero sometimes! I stayed back and made a hot lunch of chili for the weary tree hunters. When they arrived back rosy checked and proud of their find, the expressions of wonder and hope on their faces filled my heart with hope.

I thought of Christmas Eve and lighting of the candles – the boys faces glowing with anticipation and hope, and it filled my heart with hope.

Seeing my grandchildren underneath the Christmas tree – staring up through the branches, their faces full of excitement and hope – it filled my heart with hope. Seeing a picture of my granddaughter mailing her absentee ballot two weeks ago – filled my heart with hope.

Seeing my twin grandsons on election-day Tuesday – they were first time voters – proudly posing for a picture with their "I Voted" stickers – filled my heart with hope

That's the journey toward hope I'm taking this year. The hope on the faces of the beautiful children of the world – they will bring me home.

— *Marijane Rhinebold*

**Friday, December 27**

**Today's Reading:** *"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future!"* (Jeremiah 29:11, *New International Version*).

### *Surprised By an Angel*

If there is anything that I have learned during my 52 years, it is that God can use even the worst of humanity.

I spent the first three years of the millennium as a drug addict. I was a lost soul running from the truth of who I really was and had given up all hope of having a normal life. I tried every letter of the alphabet when it came to illegal substances. But I would eventually pick crystal meth as my main drug. It gave me confidence that I would soon realize was nothing but a band aid on the wounds of hurt I had suffered throughout my life.

Late in the fall of 2003, I set out to locate my drug dealer. He had moved and all I had was printed-out MapQuest directions to find my way to my next fix. I drove around Atlanta in the dead of night, delirious from what drugs remained in my system. I eventually found my way to the home of this man. The man who turned out to be an angel.

After a few minutes of what I considered annoying chit chat he says to me, "I have this feeling this is not really you. I bet you come from a good family, Christian parents who are very worried about you, and you think the drug is going to solve all your problems."

Who does this man think he is? He does not know me! But in fact, he did know me. "Here is some money. Put gas in your car and go home. Get your life right!"

I did what he said. I knew I was going to be ashamed when my parents saw me. I weighed 110 pounds, with broken and rotten teeth; I had not showered in days.

My mom embraced me with a hug, tears, and joy to see me! She said, "I woke last night thinking something was terribly wrong. So, I got on my knees and prayed for God to save my son and bring him home!"

God can use the most unlikely people to save the most unworthy. I am forever grateful to the drug dealing angel.

— *Paul Gentry*

Saturday, December 28

**Today's Reading:** *"For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6, NLT, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.).*

I've been searching high and low to find this document. I wanted to share this story as it was written by my grandfather — his parents served as missionaries in China for many years. The telling of this story has become a grand tradition for our family Christmas gatherings (completed with a box of chocolate covered cherries). My grandfather passed in 2017 and this story has only become more important to me over the years. I hope it warms your heart as well!

— Kelsey Carithers

## Chocolate Covered Cherries *Arthur Gillespie, SAS '49*

*This story won first place for a favorite Christmas story in the **Gaston Neighbors** newspaper in Gastonia, North Carolina.*



*Photo courtesy of The Columbian*

The year was 1948. My parents were missionaries to China, and the Communists were overrunning the mainland. It was a dangerous time for Americans there.

At the urging of the U.S. State Department, my mother and we four boys were suddenly evacuated, along with hundreds of other "nonessential" Americans. Father chose to stay on with his school, joining us when school ended in the spring.

When we left by army transport boat, my twin brother James and I were in the middle of our senior year at the Shanghai American School. Brother Paul was in the ninth grade, and David was 4. Stormy weather delayed our ship, and we arrived in Seattle several days late, on Dec. 23. It didn't seem possible to get our baggage through customs and keep our train reservations for the next evening.

### **On Our Way...**

James and I spent Christmas Eve at the dock and customs office. Finally ... we had gotten through customs and had contracted with the railway express agency to take our trunks to North Carolina.

We rushed back to the hotel, while Mama got the younger boys ready, packed our suitcases and checked out. There had been no time to buy Christmas presents, and we agreed to delay our Christmas until we reached North Carolina five days later. This was going to be hard to explain to 4-year-old David.

We called a taxi and waited in front of the hotel. Suddenly, with a twinkle in her eye, Mama said, "Wait here with your brothers! Make the cab driver wait! I'll be back in a minute." She dashed into a nearby drugstore, and several minutes later emerged with a paper bag full of gifts. In her brief shopping spree she had grabbed the first things in sight — a cute little tack hammer that was to serve as a toy for David and boxes of chocolate covered cherries for the rest of us.

The train was crowded with holiday travelers. The Pacific Northwest had just experienced a terrific blizzard. Snow plows had cleared the tracks and drifts were higher than the train in places.

### **Christmas Morning...**

On Christmas morning, we awoke to find that most of the travelers had left the train during the night. The sun was shining brightly on the heavy snow blanket and through the picture windows we saw the beautiful northern Rockies as few ever see them.

All day we watched as herds of deer and antelope rushed out of the mountains toward our train. The government had a program of dropping hay from airplanes and trains for the wildlife, and the sound of our train attracted them. It was a day to relax after the stressing evacuation, to read together the Christmas story in Luke, to reflect on Father's being left half a world away, to feel the warmth of a loving family. It was a day to eat chocolate covered cherries. That Christmas was 40 years ago (now over 60 years ago)... and every year Mama has given each of her boys a box of chocolate covered cherries at Christmas.

“The Word  
became flesh and blood,  
and moved  
into the neighborhood.  
We saw the glory  
with our own eyes,  
the one-of-a-kind glory,  
like Father, like Son,  
Generous inside and out,  
true from start to finish.”

—John 1:14, *The Message*

*First Sunday of Christmas*



**Sunday, December 29**

**Sunday Readings:** *Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Psalm 147:13-21; Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7; John 1:1-18*

**Today's Reading:** *"Seek your happiness in the LORD, and he will give you your heart's desire"* (Psalm 37:4, *Good News Translation*).

### ***Mountain Roots Homecoming***

Fifty-four years ago, a young, single woman who was just beginning her first year of teaching discovered that she was pregnant. This was in 1969, and she was told that as soon as she began to "show," she would no longer be able to teach in that school. My birthmother then decided it was best for her unborn child to be carried full term and given up for adoption.

I was adopted by two wonderful, loving people who could not give birth to children. My adoptive parents and my life in that home were an absolute blessing. "Being adopted" was always special and never something to be kept secret. Yet with all this love, acceptance and nurture, there was still a little something missing. Now, I would say it was a longing for "blood ties."

In 2005, I was reunited with my birthmother, and it opened a whole world of connections that answered the nature versus nurture question for me in my development. It was apparent that both influences made me who I am today. But my journey to making all the pieces of my life – all the *people* of my life – fit together wasn't complete until Summer of 2006.

My birthfather did not know anything about me so when a friend of my birthmother contacted the Shelton-Miller family to tell them about me, I was a bit apprehensive. Unlike my birthmother, who had spent her whole life making donations to an adoptee search service trying to find me, this family was about to get a big surprise. They WERE surprised but so very happy about this "other" sister / niece / aunt / cousin who was to become a part of them.

The weekend of the Shelton Reunion took me and my son, Benjamin, way up in the mountains of North Carolina to the famed Shelton Laurel. The entire Shelton family was eagerly awaiting our arrival. I will never forget driving my car THROUGH a shallow part of the creek to climb yet another mountain to get to our campsite on the edge of Pisgah National Forest. I opened the door of my car and listened to the water flow beneath my seat. It was a spiritual crossing where I began to sense powerful connections to this "place" of my ancestry.

Not long after setting up our campsite, I hardly had time to brush my teeth (in the creek) before Uncle David Shelton, the musical leader of the family, pulled up with a couple of my cousins to do some singin'. We circled up outside the open truck door and sang *"I'll Fly Away."* My heart was filled to bursting as the sound, the harmony, was perfect. They all agreed that I was my grandmother's kin – I sang like Margaret, stood like her and even looked like her (that explains the Cherokee olive skin). With that confirmation, I was finally home with all my people.

— *Lee Anne Bailie*

**Monday, December 30**

**Today's Reading:** *"And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. 10And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. 11For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord"* (Luke 2:8-11, KJV).

### *Unto You*

If I'm being honest, the first time I felt the wonder and joy of Christmas, it had little to do with God or Jesus but with a certain other Christmas character. We knew each year that Santa Claus would come to our house at Christmas, but somehow each year it still managed to astonish us.

I recently found a few of the pictures my dad had taken over the years in which he did his best to try to capture that look of astonishment on the faces of us kids. Every year my dad would stand in the same place in the living room with his camera, ready to catch me and my two sisters as we rounded the corner from the hallway to get our first glimpse of gifts under the tree. He did this every year, and I'm not sure why, because he got the same picture every year: three pajama-clad, sleepy-eyed kids, with messy, unbrushed hair, standing in the living room amazed.

To be honest, the pictures did change a little as the years went on. My sisters and I figured out that what our dad wanted was expression, so in time we gave it to him, hamming it up with goofy looks. But even hammed up, our faces still held the expression of what was causing our little hearts to dance.

Looking at those old photographs I can clearly recall that feeling. And I can particularly recall that the thrill and excitement of those moments weren't just because of what Santa had brought, but that he had been there — in our living room. He had been stuffing my stocking, nibbling my cookies. Of all the houses in the world, he had chosen to come to my house. And every year I saw it I was amazed.

Looking back at these early photos of Christmas morning, I am also reminded that we're not sweet simple children anymore. We are tired, grumpy grown-ups, living over scheduled lives, that often feel unbearably complicated. This time of the year we find ourselves spending money we don't have to buy gifts for people who don't need them. Spending time we don't have trying to meet expectations of family and friends. All the while, doing our best to pretend to be jolly. As grown-ups, a lot of us arrive at this time of the year spent and exhausted.

*"Unto you..."* the angels tell the shepherds. And I wonder if maybe the real magic is that the first words of Christmas joy are spoken to a group of grim men working the night watch. Men with the difficult and frustrating job of tending to sheep in a land where there was precious little vegetation. Men who were generally despised by their community and who understood well what it felt like to scrape by from one day to the next. It was precisely to them, precisely for people with that kind of dull pain, that a Savior had been born. God had put on flesh and had taken up residence right where they were. God had come to make his home in the real world, with them.

And maybe that news is exactly what we need to hear during this season of Advent. It is to us a Savior has come. Of all the people in the world, he has come to us — the tired, frustrated, grumpy old grown-up, who has long since given up on Christmas joy. He's come here — to our house. God has come to live with us.

That's news that can make the heart dance.

— Mike Ethridge

**Tuesday, December 31 / *New Year's Eve***

**Today's Reading:** *"Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous, right hand"* (Isaiah 41:10, *English Standard Version*).

### **A Prayer for Peace**

O God, tear open the heavens and come down to us. Because we need You. More than ever, it seems, we need You. The global tragedies and the personal traumas of this past year have toppled the building blocks of our lives. We look to You in hope; we wait for You with renewed desire.

As we carry Your word in our hearts this next year, teach us to see the signs of Your presence, to look with expectancy toward Your promises. For too long we have stood with our backs toward the sun and our faces turned away from the source of light and hope. And so we have found ourselves living our lives in the shadows of what is happening to us. When we look ahead, we see darkness and uncertainty.

Now, in watchfulness and expectancy, turn us toward the sun and the light of Your love so that the shadow of hardship may fall behind us. Shine on us this day that we may walk toward our future with hope and in confidence that Your love will yet make all things new.

As we turn the page to a new year, come to us in fresh ways this year Renew us day by day by Your grace at work in us. This we pray through Christ, who comes to us anew even while we are waiting. Amen.

### **A Blessing**

*Now, go in peace, knowing that the God of peace will guard and keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus our Lord.*

“When they saw the star,  
they were filled with joy!  
They entered the house  
and saw the child ...  
and they bowed down  
and worshiped him.  
Then they opened  
their treasure chests and  
gave him gifts of gold,  
frankincense, and myrrh.

—Matthew 2:10-11, *The Message*

*Second Sunday of Christmas*

## Sunday, January 5 / *Twelfth Day of Christmas*

**Sunday Readings:** *Isaiah 63:7-9; Psalm 111; Hebrews 2:10-18; Matthew 2:1-12*

**Today's Reading:** *"When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy" (Matthew 2:10, New Revised Standard Version).*

### *Lessons on the Journey*

I was always a Daddy's girl. I would learn many of life's important lessons from him. When I was two. Daddy would lie on his back and let me stand on his hands, balancing, as he lifted me in the air. I learned that I could soar as the eagle as long as I was firmly in my Father's hands.

When my heart was broken for the first time, Daddy came into my room, sat on my bed, and in his serious pastoral voice said, "Do you want me to shoot him?" I said, "No Daddy!" Still in that serious voice he said, "Then I guess we will have to forgive him for breaking my little girl's heart." I learned forgiveness is a gift to yourself. It allows you to move forward.

Our family camped at Lake James a few miles from my parent's home. Daddy would drive out to the campground early in the mornings for a cup of coffee, a cheese biscuit and a theological discussion with his little girl. We didn't always agree, but we always respected each other's ideas. It was during these discussions I learned that you can still love someone and disagree with them.

Not enough years later, Daddy called and asked me to come by their house. He told me he had been diagnosed with lung cancer. He told the doctor he wasn't afraid of dying, only afraid of pain. The doctor said, "Preacher, you have the edge on dying, and I can take care of the pain." That was a hard lesson to hear. It is okay to be afraid, but God will always lead the way and He will always have our back.

I would have the privilege of five more years before Daddy's health required Hospice. I cherished every moment. Then one day, my Manager said he needed to send me to Connecticut for an important business meeting. I begged him to send someone else. But he promised to get me home if there was any change in Daddy's health.

That evening I went to see Daddy to let him know I was going to be out of town. I told him we would celebrate my birthday when I returned. Before I left that evening Daddy asked me to pray with him. I held his hands and bowed my head and waited. But he squeezed my hand and said, "No, Baby Girl, you pray." I have no idea the words I said, but I'll never forget the feeling that came over me. I felt like Elisha must have felt when Elijah covered Elisha's shoulder with his mantle. Dad whispered to me, "You need to take care of your sister, brother, and your mother. They will need you."

My heart was heavy as I flew to Connecticut. I never made it to that important business meeting, because the next morning when I went to check out, I was told I needed to call home. Don said that Mom had called. She had to call the Hospice nurse. They didn't think Daddy would make it even until I got home. My manager was true to his word. He made all the arrangements for my trip home. When we arrived at my parent's home, Cuba told me Daddy was waiting for me. She had told him he couldn't die because it was my birthday and I was on my way home.

At midnight that evening I went to Daddy and told him it was no longer my birthday and he could go home. Several hours later his journey was over. I was at peace. As Paul told the Thessalonians, "...so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope," I would grieve for years to come, but not as one without hope. Because I knew Daddy was home at last. The lessons were over. The student had now become the teacher.

— Wendy Case

Monday, January 6 / *Epiphany*

Today's Reading: "Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth" (Psalm 50:2, NRSV).

### *The Work of Christmas*

When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flock,  
The work of Christmas begins:  
    To find the lost,  
    To heal the broken,  
    To feed the hungry,  
    To release the prisoner,  
    To rebuild the nations,  
To bring peace among others,  
To make music in the heart.

— By *Howard Thurman*

*Howard Thurman (1899-1981) was an author, philosopher, theologian, Christian mystic, educator, and civil rights leader. This poem and others by Thurman can be found in [The Mood of Christmas and Other Celebrations](#), published by Friends United Press.*





**Ministers – All Members of Fernwood Baptist Church**

Mrs. Lee Anne Bailie.....	Director of Family and Communication Ministries
Mrs. Marcia Harris.....	Assistant Music Associate
Mr. Seth Johnson.....	Nursery Attendant
Rev. Dean Newkirk.....	Office Administrator
Mrs. Rebecca Turner.....	Music Associate
Dr. Stafford Turner.....	Director of Music Ministries
Rev. Michael Tutterow.....	Interim Pastor
Mrs. Mary Helen Wessinger.....	Financial Administrator
Mr. Don Williams.....	Custodian
Rev. Dr. P. Randall Wright.....	Pastor Emeritus

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