

Advent

DEVOTIONS



As our faith grows and develops, it is important to be able to recognize what God is doing in our lives and in the world around us. God is always at work, but we have to train ourselves to see the Divine in the ordinary. It is our hope with this book of devotions, written by your fellow Washington Streeters, that you will more fully grasp the extent of God's work in the world, prepare to receive anew the joy of the Christ child, and look expectantly for the return of our Lord and Savior. Many blessings for Advent.

Due to the overwhelming response from you, we have more devotions than days in Advent so enjoy these into the New Year.

A Story of Advent – and Home

Candace Berry

In this Advent season, my thoughts take me back to my first Christmas at Washington Street in 2010. I had just arrived in South Carolina in mid-November, so the first thing on my list was to find a Methodist church. Washington Street was the first one I visited, and I never left. So beautiful and historic, this church offered the peace and comfort I longed for that December, since I was so far from home and my familiar Methodist church in Texas in a small town of 9,000. As I walked up the side walk on that first Sunday, I was thinking of all the people who had walked that path up to Washington Street United Methodist. I could almost feel the presence of the faithful from long ago walking with me.

It was a particularly important time for me that fit right into Advent season that year, the season of “coming.” While I was in a new city after living in a small town for 30 years and knowing no one beyond my new co-workers, I felt a sense of anticipation I had hoped for in this adventure. I moved here for a job opportunity, and it felt like everything was new that season! The circumstances and timing of the move were so unique that I was absolutely sure God was guiding me to an experience He knew was in my heart, but I didn’t have the courage to speak out loud.

Now seven years later, I’ve grown to love this city and community of people. It is a friendly, welcoming area unlike anything I’ve ever experienced. Not only is South Carolina a beautiful state with extremely nice weather, but the people also have such a welcoming spirit, which seems to be the norm in the South, especially in the Carolinas. In a way it felt like “coming” home, but to a different home than in my past. My heart will always be in my home state of Texas where I was born and lived all my life, but this has come to be a second home for me much like an adopted sibling becomes a true member of a family!

As we prepare for Advent, the coming of Christ in various meanings, I remind you to trust Him in all ways, in all situations. Talk to Him about everything as if He is next to you, as if He is the comfortable companion He is to me every day. As excited as I was about coming here, it was scary making the move alone. I’d never moved to a new city (much less new state!) without my sons, who are all grown now. But as I felt in my heart each day, I was not alone. He was with me, guiding me, loving me, listening, “hearing” my tears as their own prayer, and comforting me until today when I am at home here almost like being in Texas. Thank you, Washington Street. You and your people are truly a gift from our Father. Welcome Advent!

A Family of Service

Bob Boone

“Iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another. He who tends the fig tree will eat its fruit, and he who cares for his master will be honored.” Proverbs 27:17-18 (RSV)

I grew up in a typical 1960's family with three siblings, a stay at home Mom, and a Dad that worked for a large corporation. Being the baby, with a 10-year age difference between myself and my oldest sibling, I was either being overly coddled or teased and picked upon to see who could make me maddest the fastest. This was normal suburbia at its finest. We attended church every Sunday without fail, and Mama and Dad were determined to raise their children with Christian beliefs in the turbulent world of the 1960's. She was adamant that each child understand that every human was God's creation and that each had a value. No man was ever above another man regardless of race, income, or religious belief. This outlook was pretty radical for a conservative woman in the 1960's.

Our world changed when, in the early 1970's, Mama was diagnosed with breast cancer. The medical response to combat this disease was, at the time, surgery and large amounts of chemotherapy and radiation, all of which proved futile to stop the spread of the illness. After five years, our mama lost her battle with cancer, leaving a husband at age 45 with four children ranging in ages from 23 to 13. Our anchor had been lost, and without our mama's influence, we could have drifted in many negative directions. But we did not. We could have become angry with God for taking our Mama, but we did not. We could have abandoned the church, but we did not. Instead, we became a family of service.

Daddy chose to get involved with our church's finance and steering committees, as well as opening our home up to parents of critically ill children who were being treated at a local world renowned hospital. My oldest sibling became an integral part of her church choir and mission planning group, while my two middle brothers became active in children's education, education foundations, and schooling needs for children with learning challenges.

And as for me, I became an active member of the American Cancer Society and volunteered at the local hospital for indigent patients suffering from the ravages of cancer with no family to visit and care for them.

I thank God for giving me a wonderful Mama, who, even with her brief time on this earth, taught me to value every man and woman and to remember that through service to others, we continue to do the Lord's will and glorify His name.

Waiting and Hoping

Jennifer Boone

“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

We have all experienced great periods in our lives where we must wait. As a child, we waited painstakingly for Christmas morning to finally arrive, and as teens we waited by the mailbox for acceptance letters. As adults, we wait for all kinds of things: traffic to clear, good news from the doctor, praise from your boss. And while waiting, we each have a seed of hope that grows inside of us.

Waiting and hoping are not always mutually exclusive. In fact, there is one word used for both in Spanish: *esperar*. It means either to wait or to hope. It's up to the speaker to intone which word is meant. In most of our instances of waiting, we really do mean both. *Esperamos*. We hope and wait.

Advent is one of those times where we do both. We hope for our future as we wait for our King. Each week, we sing, “O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” as we light our candles. We pray for peace, we hope for good things to come, we await our Savior.

In the midst of our tumultuous world and our busy lives, our tiny seeds of hope provide light for others. Each day we pray for others, hope for others, hope for ourselves. We spread our hope a little further. We are God's people on this earth, and we do His good works. Our hoping, our waiting helps others to see His plan.

¿*Cómo esperas?* How do you hope?

Christ's Spiritual Gifts: Discovering Mine through Renewal 2020 and FACE

Susan Boone

Ephesians 4:11-13

Paul's words in Ephesians 4 show us that every Christian is given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift so that we can serve one another like Christ did: with the intent being that each Christian will recognize his or her own gift and calling to bless and serve others. Paul encourages us to radiate God's love and to utilize our special spiritual gifts for the building up of the body of Christ: the church and His people. Christ's spiritual gifts equip each of us to participate in our own way in His ministry.

When I received Robbie Douglas's call in the fall of 2014 to participate on a team to develop Washington Street's Strategic Ministry Plan, Renewal 2020, I did not know what I had to offer to the team or the process, but I felt certain that I wanted to serve. Having been a life-long Catholic until about five years ago, my spiritual life was quiet and personal and spent mostly on what I would describe as the "sidelines." I was initially drawn to Washington Street and the Methodist faith because of my dear husband, Trey. My love of Washington Street quickly grew, however, because of the people and the culture in this wonderful place. Washington Street's demonstration of love, support, and inclusion to an outsider like me changed my faith forever. Being a part of the Renewal 2020 process became the catalyst for helping me to recognize my gifts, find ways to serve, and share my faith with others for the first time in my life.

As our church moves forward with FACE and the implementation of the Strategic Ministry Plan, I will find my home in Faith Formation. This component will enable me to serve God's purpose and help touch others who want to know God but who may not have discovered their spiritual gifts. My hope is to help others feel the same love and support that Washington Street gave to me.

Prayer: Thank you, Father, for the wonderful gifts You have given to each of us. Help us to encourage other believers to discover their gifts, to use them to glorify Your name, and to spread the message of Your love to our community and the world. We come with open hearts and willing hands ready to accomplish Your work on earth. Please continue to guide us as we serve Your purpose through FACE. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

A Prayer for Advent

Trey Boone

Lord, during this season of Advent, please help us to take time to be still and listen for Your voice. Help us to focus on the needs of others, our family, our church, our community, our nation, and the world that You so graciously provided for us.

Help us to listen so that we may hear the needs of all Your people with hidden wounds. These are wounds that we cannot see but, nonetheless, cause Your children much pain and grief. The pain may be the result of grief for a lost loved one, the failure of a marriage, the loss of a job, or the struggle with a terminal illness.

Remind us, Dear Lord, that in this joyous season, where we celebrate the birth of Your son, some of Your children are not able to celebrate the season because of the sadness of their story. Keep us from making assumptions about their journey or judging them because, although their outward appearance may seem fine, they are suffering. Remind us that we do not know their story and that we need to open our hearts to their struggles and needs.

At this time of year, it is easy to think of the less fortunate, the homeless, and the poor because their struggles are visible. Lord, please give us the compassion and the wisdom to look beyond outward appearances and to see Your children who are dealing with hidden wounds and who are suffering alone. Fill us with Your spirit so that we may share Your love with all of Your children and help bring solace and peace to those who are hurting.

A Season of Thanks

Lamar Brabham

As we enter the Advent Season, it's always an excellent time to reflect. It is a time when we watch leaves fall and the weather becomes brisker. We realize winter will soon be here. It's the time we give thanks for all we have, spend time with friends and family, and celebrate the birth of our savior, Jesus Christ.

We are lucky to live in a country that allows us the freedom to express ourselves in so many ways. In this time where people want their way and don't want to hear opinions or ideas they don't agree with, we all need to think about the Advent Season and strive to live as Jesus taught us.

I have so much to be thankful for: a loving wife who's my rock, a son who has an excellent work ethic and high moral values, a church I have worshiped in for 34 years, and a Savior who has been with me through the good times and comforted me in the bad times.

Prayer: God bless us all in the Advent Season and help us to reflect on its meaning. Amen.

Simple Acceptance

Kelley Cannon

John 9

I've always been intrigued by this story: the healing of the blind beggar. It's fascinating in that Jesus used dirt and his own spit to remove his blindness, a condition this man had since he was born. It's easy for us to actually imagine this miracle happening because of the everyday nature of the tools that Jesus used. We all understand clay and saliva. We can all picture this event taking place on a hot and dusty road long ago. We can try to imagine how it must have felt to have a life-long condition removed through listening to Jesus and obeying his instructions to go wash in the pool.

But the part of the story that resonates with me the most is the man's reaction when he is being grilled by the Pharisees in the temple. They ask him what happened; they ask his parents what happened. They bring him back in to interrogate him some more. Finally, the blind beggar puts it in simple words: "All I know is: I was blind, and now I can see!" In today's world, he probably would have prefaced it: "Look, guys, here's the deal..."

Sometimes, we as individuals or as a community of believers can bog down in the details. If the denominations of today's Christian Church were trying to decide how the miracle happened, wouldn't it become versions of these questions: How much spit was there? Would we apply the mud to another blind man from an individual cup or a common chalice? Should the songs of thanksgiving for this miracle include modern music in the sanctuary? Maybe yes, but no electric guitar? Does the Church's applier of Miracle Mud apply to the left or right eye first? Silly examples, maybe, but the Pharisees and today's modern Church miss the point sometimes from Ecclesiastes 8:17: "Nobody can understand what God does here on earth. No matter how hard people try to understand it, they cannot."

When I feel myself getting caught up in the nitty gritty and trying to apply the logic of mankind to grace and salvation, I try to think of the blind beggar. To paraphrase a familiar hymn, "All I know is, I once was lost but now I'm found."

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, that we don't have to understand the details, and help me to accept the grace that I don't deserve without my getting in my own way.

The Joy of it All

Susan Caskey

The Christmas season means different things to everyone. For me, it is simply a time of joy. From my earliest childhood memories, my parents made Christmas a magical time. Back in the day, our home was always lovingly decorated and open for visits from friends and neighbors. My mother was a fabulous cook and always had tasty treats on hand. My dad and I would watch “A Charlie Brown Christmas” together every year even into my adult years. When I look back on it, I am amazed at how much we received from “Santa” especially since, at times, my parents struggled financially. It was a simpler time but one that was filled with love and joy.

The decorations and festivities were nice, but the most important aspect of the season centered on church activities and the celebration of the birth of our Savior. Nothing overshadowed this celebration. I am so thankful that I had parents who raised me to believe and know the true joy of Christmas. They taught me that Jesus is the greatest gift. When I married Sam, things were a bit different. He did not have wonderful family memories of Christmas. Sure, he received gifts and made the traditional trips to Grandma’s house, but church and the celebration of Jesus were not the primary focus. It took several years, lots of prayers, involvement in our church and two children for him to learn that Jesus is the true reason for the season.

During the last 15 years of his life, his spiritual journey continued, and he knew that true joy was found in trusting God and keeping Him at the center of everything. His faith continues to inspire me each day.

My wish for all of you during Advent is to find joy: in your family, in your relationships, at church, but especially in knowing that you have a God whose love is so great that He gave you the light of the world.

MERRY CHRISTMAS!

A Special Birth

Janet Cotter

From the altar of the Christmas cradle, abiding love came for mankind.

A Christmas tableau, beautiful in its simplicity, comes to mind when remembering the account of the birth of Christ.

The shepherds, heralded by the angel of the Lord and a host of angels, knelt in wonder by the manger.

The wise men, guided by a bright star and faith, offered gifts and bowed in adoration.

The animals in the stable lowed, and Joseph stood watch; but Mary kept all these things in her mother's heart.

It was a night of joy in that humble place where the Triune God reigned: the Father, the infant son Christ Jesus, and the Holy Spirit.

Mary's love for humankind must have begun that night.

Joseph's belief in God's promise was realized and personified by this child, and Joseph honorably served as earthly father to this little one who grew to be Savior of the world.

May we His followers always remember the prophesied birth made true and hold the first Christmas, its purity and meaning, in our hearts and lives forever.

Bow down in holy gratitude for this babe, Emmanuel, who will eternally be King of Kings!

GLORIA!

I Want to Hold Your Hand

Ed & Charlotte Ellis

At 8:00 on February 9th 1964, America tuned in to CBS and the Ed Sullivan Show. But this night was different. Seventy-three million people gathered in front of their TV sets to see the first live performance of the Beatles on U.S. soil. Most of us remember where we were that night as we watched. But what I remember most was the song they sang: “I want to hold your hand.” The song captivated us.

In 1964 I was serving a student appointment, four little country Methodist churches, in Blenheim, SC, a small country town in Marlboro County, eight miles out of Bennettsville, SC. My first wife, Iris; my daughter, Loraine; and I drove all the way to Florence the next day – about 40 miles – to buy the Beatles album. We said it was for our five-year-old daughter, Loraine. But truth be told, we wanted it.

We knew the song was about teen age love. However, it appeals to all of us. There is something very special about having someone hold our hand. It is especially true when we are in trouble.

And believe me, we are all in trouble. This is a world full of trouble: growing weather problems full of storms, fires, floods, and drought. Add to this the growing poor segment of our economy, growing violence in our streets, in our entertainment venues, in our schools, even in our churches. We are afraid, and we need someone to hold our hand and comfort us, and to assure us that he or she won't leave us.

Charlotte, my second wife, and I have had many long discussions about this, sometimes as part of our devotional time. It is a daily part of our prayers. We found it fascinating that 60 Minutes recently replayed that segment from the Ed Sullivan Show, and we were able to watch the Beatles sing “I want to hold your hand” again.

Advent is about the promise of someone who is coming, first as a precious and innocent child; then as a boy who is obsessed with learning about God; and finally as a man who teaches his disciples, performs miracles, and finally dies a cruel and painful death taking our sin upon Himself. He leaves with a promise to always be with us, to always hold our hand.

Christmas is the outgrowth of Advent. His coming as a precious gift of God teaching us to become gift givers. We follow His example and give beautiful gifts. And as a reminder that they should be beautiful – like the gift of eternal life – we wrap them in beautiful paper. But they aren't always in beautiful paper. Sometimes they come in the simple form of caring. We reach out and say, I want to hold your hand.

The Postcards of Life

Neal Foster

Many summers ago, I heard the term, “The Postcards of Life.” It was my eldest brother that used the term when, as a family, we were sitting around and discussing life’s challenges and/or setbacks that a person can experience. After I heard this term, I probed my brother to explain it, and he stated that each moment in a person’s life, whether good or bad, can be symbolically depicted with a “postcard” of the specific experience. The underlying idea is that the more moments a person has experienced in his/her life, whether they are the “highest of highs,” “lowest of lows,” or somewhere in between, a full and fulfilling life can be symbolically represented by the range and variety of the “postcards” that a person has created.

Since I heard that term, I started to think about how I was living my life. Was I really living an extensive range and variety of “life experiences,” thus symbolically creating a broad and deep range of postcards, or was I just satisfied to limit myself to the experiences that I was comfortable with and attempting to avoid those experiences that may not turn out in my favor. After some reflection, I felt that my life could use a few more postcards, whether they be good or bad. To develop those postcards would require me to get out of my comfort zone and take some risks. Further, I began to think that the people who truly live life are those who have created, and continue to create, their postcards, even if some postcards may be symbolic of extreme pain, disappointment, or hardship. Even though bad things happen to good people, these people are the ones who can learn from their experiences but more importantly, share them with others for mutual learning. Our lives are not balanced if we only experience the “highs” and not the “lows,” but, eventually, if we take some risks, those experiences will balance out. It is certainly not a bad thing to have a balanced life of “highs” and “lows,” and those people who experience “lows” should not be judged but, rather, supported in a Christ-like manner.

Each day, one can hear stories of people who have experienced the “highest of highs” and “lowest of lows,” and then stories of some people who have appeared to protect themselves. I believe that God wanted us to live life in full abundance so as to ensure that we did not leave anything on the table when we leave this physical world. Similar to His offer to his Disciples, Jesus wants us to “get out of our boat” (i.e., a comfort zone) and trust Him so that we are able to live life in abundance. Sure, such a decision encompasses many sorts of risks, but Jesus stated that He would be with us, always. We just need to exercise our profession of faith, listen to and follow the signs that God has placed in front of us, and, most importantly, allow God to “take the wheel” of our lives.

Thus, I ask you, in your life, have you symbolically created a numerous set of postcards, of many different varieties, that are both broad and deep? If not, and so that you do not leave anything on the table when your life in the physical world comes to an end, although the “boat” can be comfortable, a truly fulfilling life is one that is inspired and led by God. You do not want to end your life, then meet with God in heaven, and have Him point out what your life could have been like if you had just “gotten out of the boat.” Trust in Him with all of your heart and with all that you have and allow Him to help you create and add to your “Postcards of Life.”

We Serve God By Serving Others

Lee Haynes

THOUGHTS FROM RICK WARREN

“You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.” Galatians 5:13

Many people have the misconception that being “called” by God is something only missionaries, pastors, nuns, and other church leaders experience. But the Bible says everyone is called to serve God by serving others.

We are not saved by serving, but we are saved for serving. The Apostle Paul gives three insights related to this:

First, the basis for serving others is salvation. Paul says, “You were called to be free.” You cannot serve God until you’ve been set free by Jesus. It’s the prerequisite for serving. Until you experience the transforming power of God’s grace in your life, you’re too enslaved by your own hurts, habits, and hang-ups to think much about others.

Without the freedom of forgiveness, you’ll end up serving for the wrong reasons: trying to earn the approval of others, trying to run away from your pain, trying to remedy your guilt, trying to impress God. Service motivated by these illegitimate reasons is bound to leave you burned out and bitter in the end.

Second, the barrier to serving others is selfishness. Paul warns, “Do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature.” The number one reason we don’t have the time or energy to serve others is that we’re preoccupied with our own agendas, dreams, and pleasures.

Only a small minority of people use their lives to serve others, but Jesus said, “If you insist on saving your life, you will lose it. Only those who throw away their lives for my sake and for the sake of the Good News will ever know what it means to really live.” (Mark 8:35, LB)

Third, the motive for serving is love. Paul says, “Serve one another in love.” This is an important key to building community. 1 Corinthians 13:3 records, “No matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I’m bankrupt without love.” (MSG)

God is far more interested in why you serve others than in how well you serve them. He’s always looking at your heart, serving willingly and eagerly out of love for Jesus and gratitude for all He’s done for you. You are most like Jesus when you’re serving others. After washing His disciples’ feet, Jesus said, “I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you.” (John 13:14–15 NLT)

Busy-ness and Rest

Susan Hefelfinger

Busy busy busy. Laundry, laundry. Dishes, dishes. Work work work. Coffee...more coffee! Errands, oh the errands. Calendar management, emails, RSVPs. “Yes!” “Of course I’ll be there; I’d love it!” A cake for this event, a costume for that, filling a volunteer slot when asked (because saying NO to a friend or a need is simply not done). Sometimes Advil and a “can’t make it” cancellation make their appearance.

What about sleep, a moment for self care, or just being present? Bah, humbug!

Does this sound like your December? In fact, does this sound like any given Tuesday? This seems to be our status update most any time of the year. We LOVE the busy train and hop on it with enthusiasm. Sometimes that train is the high-speed TGV. Some days I feel like I’m dragging behind it. Where is the pause button on this machine of life?

My favorite movie is, “The Sound of Music,” and my favorite quote is spoken by Captain Georg von Trapp. In conversation with Baroness Schraeder, he says, “Activity suggests a life filled with purpose.” I was young when I first heard this, too young to have a busy life, but it made an indelible impression.

The operative word here is suggests. What are we suggesting: that we are important, valued, needed only when busy? Does this point imply that our approval of ourselves and others is conditional? Who or what are we serving with all this activity? Are we OK with who we are in the moments of quiet?

God values us even in the quiet. He does not require a full calendar to shower us with grace, love, or blessings. Our Fourth Commandment is to remember the Sabbath, to stop and commune with Him. God gives us permission to rest from our labors, even if we do not give that permission to ourselves.

Every day, especially during Advent, take time to be holy. Ask yourself what and whom your activity serves.

Take the Time

Happy Henry

“Inasmuch as you have done it unto the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me.” Matthew 25:40

There are so many times and so many occasions when we, as Christians, can make others feel better about themselves or just plain cheer them up. So many times we hesitate to provide these good works because we think such things have to be on a large scale. However, often a small gesture or word can make someone’s day brighter.

Sometimes it takes only small things to make a difference in someone’s life. It may be a phone call to a service man, giving him a thank you for a job well done; it may be listening, with no judgment, when someone needs to talk; maybe it is a hug for a child who needs confirmation; it may be a smile to a harried cashier at a crowded store; it may be to engage in conversation with a waiter or waitress, thereby showing this person that he or she matters to you. In every incident, regardless of what we may do or say, we are giving someone encouragement and showing that person we care. It takes such a small amount of time to show compassion and kindness. Giving someone a cup of water comes in many different ways: a hug, a smile, a look, an unhurried time of listening. We need to be tuned in to people’s needs and just maybe we might make a difference.

Prayer: Dear Lord, during this season of Advent, there are so many people around us who need to have hope and need to be encouraged for so many different reasons. May we be generous with our compassion and love so that we may, in small, quiet ways, be a blessing to others. In Christ’s name we pray, Amen.

A Different Christmas Day

Jonathan Jackson

I don’t remember a great deal about Christmas Day of 2003. I was serving in Baghdad, Iraq, and on that particular day my squad was assigned to escort our battalion commander, a lieutenant colonel, on any trip he might take outside our compound walls. There was no time to rest or celebrate; that Christmas was a work day like every other during our deployment.

Like any good leader, the colonel wanted to be out in the city visiting his troops. We had different platoons stationed at the airport or guarding police stations, and we had to make the rounds to ensure each one got a visit from their commander on that special day.

It turned into a very long day. Baghdad wasn’t always easy to maneuver through and, without operational traffic lights, jams were common. They were bad enough that our trucks couldn’t always navigate around the obstacles. The day turned into one long blur of visits with weary men in dun-colored fatigues, followed by dusty rides through mile after mile of clogged streets. Each stop featured the commander greeting his troops heartily, handing out goodies and urging them to keep spirits high.

Naturally, we all would have rather been at home with our families on Christmas. No one really wanted to spend Christmas Day hop-scotching around crowded Baghdad in a dusty truck convoy, but we remained cheerful in spite of our work. Even though it was a long day, it was a peaceful and uneventful one, and we were thankful for it. It was a Christmas without gifts, without feast, and without family, but it was a day we were glad to have and to share with one another.

HOPE

Cory Jansen

(This poem was written by Cory, brother of Kel Jansen, who died earlier this year.)

Hope is necessary.

It is the compass of life's map. Without it, we are lost.

Even though the sight of hope seems limitless and perpetual, it guides us patiently one day at a time.

Hope is dire to the human spirit.

It sincerely believes that each and every one of us deserves a chance.

Hope makes change possible and life worth living.

It is faith that everything will be okay.

And when we feel that there is absolutely no hope, it can breathe life back into our spirit in an instant.

It can be a sudden rescue, but at times its patience is also crucial.

Hope is positive and inspiring.

Even the smallest glimmer of hope can be life altering.

It is graceful, unbiased, and unprejudiced, but we must have our eyes open to see it.

Hope is always waiting.

It will never forget us – even if we have forgotten it.

Hope will always prevail.

It gives us determination to strive forward.

It is strength to tread through rough waters.

It is courage when life is dark and treacherous.

Hope is smiling in the face of fear and anxiety, knowing we will survive.

It is the belief that life will persevere through destruction.

Hope is eternal.

And no matter how much we give it away, we will always have it.

Nothing Left to Give?...Dig a Little Deeper

Kel Jansen

You can speak about life from only your personal perspective. Where you are “standing” makes all the difference on how you perceive, process, and reflect. This year has given me humbling insight into my life and, I feel, the human experience in general.

The year 2017 has been the most difficult year in my 44 years of living. This year I experienced the sudden and unexpected deaths of my younger brother, Cory Jansen, and of my close friend, John Flanagan. It has been a year of personal challenges and learning what my spiritual, emotional, and mental limits are even beyond those close personal losses. There have been days I have felt low and nearly unable to function. At times I have felt empty inside, as though my emotional well had run dry and I literally had nothing more to give.

Oddly enough, on some of the darkest days when I coasted aimlessly onward, I was afforded some insight into life, love, and the importance of connecting with and doing for others. I experienced a personal and palpable uplift each and every time I did something to help another person in need no matter how small or trivial it seemed. It could be offering a kind word, eye contact, and a smile for someone who looked in need, buying lunch for someone unsuspecting, or simply listening to someone who needed to talk.

Each encounter gave me a lift out of a spiritual hole, a lift which helped me realize that when it felt as though life had “taken everything out of me” and it felt like I had nothing left to give, the best thing I could do was to give a little more to those around me in need. The importance of making that personal connection in a positive way with others is an immeasurable gift for yourself and was waiting to be experienced if I put forth the effort to get it.

God put us here together for a reason. Human life could not exist in solitude. Christ teaches us to love those around us. Is it possible one of the major life lessons Christ is trying to teach us is that by loving others around us and acting selflessly, there actually lies a secret to another level of happiness? We may be fully unaware of this level at times, but it can provide a lift up out of darkness and into the light.

I can only speak about life from my perspective. But from where I’m standing, I say that’s exactly what He wants us to know.

God's Got This!

Lish Jansen

I learned early to “Let go and Let GOD.” This does not mean I do this religiously, as I am only human. I am tested daily. I recall when my dad was diagnosed with a progressive neurological disease for which there was no cure. I worried and worried and was consumed by it. I finally decided to give it to GOD and felt a peace run over me. I no longer worried about his death but enjoyed the time I had with him. It was his illness that brought me to my profession as a therapist. I feel that GOD works through me on a daily basis as I care for my patients.

Years later, my mom was diagnosed with Stage III cancer and I again was tested to let GOD take control. I have learned that GOD will not take you out of the difficult situation, but there is a peace knowing that He is with you as you go through it. It reminds me of Psalm 23: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.” As my mom ages and I divide my time between caring for her and my own family, I constantly try to strike a balance, asking daily for GOD to help me get through each day and sometimes each hour! I never said it was easy; I have to ask for HIS help, constantly.

This past year has been difficult for my family as we experienced the death of my brother-in-law as well as several other close friends and patients. Each family member has been on his or her own journey of grieving and healing. Trying to teach my girls about death and dying and letting go and giving our worries to GOD have been challenging. I can only pray that through my words and actions, as well as through the love and teachings my girls receive at Washington Street, they too will learn to Let Go and Let GOD.

I am thankful for my church family, for they have helped my family and me immensely these past few months. GOD puts people in our lives for a reason: many times what comes out of their mouths is exactly what GOD wants us to hear at that moment. GOD has me in the palm of His hand, this I know.

The Best Christmas Gift

Ann Jessup

“Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.” Isaiah 40:28-31 (NIV)

The time leading up to Christmas in 1985 was heart wrenching. My maternal grandmother died after a short illness, and we buried her in the snow in Urbana, Illinois, on the afternoon of December 24. I was lucky enough to grow up near her throughout my childhood and teen years; I remember many dinners featuring her fried chicken, green beans, mashed potatoes, apple pie, and lots of laughter. Seeing her so ill in the hospital shook me to my core, and while she was not afraid of what was coming, I was terrified at the prospect of losing her. Her death was the first one close enough to really hurt, and the insult of burying her on the day before Christmas felt as cold and hopeless as the ground we stood on.

Later that day, I returned home to a family dinner hosted by my father and stepmother and was surrounded by my extended family on that side. I remember fighting back feelings of weariness. Many tears were welling behind my eyes while life, joy, and laughter went on despite the sadness we'd faced earlier in the day. At the end of the dinner, my paternal grandfather presented me with a gift. He'd crafted a small stable with a manger in it out of wood he'd cut from his property in Shelbyville, Illinois. He was a bit of a “weeper,” and we both cried when I tried to tell him how much it meant to receive that gift from him on such a difficult day. As I write this devotion, I can still experience the precious moment we shared over something he built out of his love for me.

Each Advent, I set up that little stable and a nativity scene I purchased with money my grandmother had set aside for my Christmas gift. This little rustic scene reminds me of the love Jesus spreads through people like my grandparents. It represents hope and brings a renewal of strength during the busy holiday season. And it reminds me how God entered this earth in the most humble of ways to walk among us, to fully experience humankind, and to bring salvation to all. It really was the best Christmas gift.

The Value of Words

Jim Lane

As a teacher for over 30 years, I think a great deal about the power of words. I think about words that have been spoken: the uplifting potential of some and the devastating consequences of others. I think about the lost opportunities of words left unsaid. I have seen, on many occasions, how words spoken have completely changed people's outlooks, perceptions, and plans. Carefully planned words of compassion and love, hastily spoken words of judgment and hurt – they all remain with us for a long time, and they all impact us in very real ways.

One of my most vivid childhood memories was as a young child at Humpty Dumpty Kindergarten some 54 years ago. It was a school day in December, and for some reason I can't recall, my kindergarten teacher, Mrs. McBride, drove me home that day. We lived in rural Marlboro County in the McColl community. Like many children, I considered Christmas a big deal. I had somehow cut down a small pine (think Charlie Brown's Christmas tree here) and had placed the tree in a bucket of dirt near the country road in front of our house. I guess I thought the two or three cars that passed by on the highway between McColl and Clio needed some Christmas cheer! My mother had given me three red, fold-out, tissue paper bells (some of you remember those), and I had placed those bells on my tree as strategically as a five-year-old can. When Mrs. McBride drove up to my house, she shared a statement that has remained with me for 54 years and will always be with me. She said, "That is the most beautiful tree I have ever seen." As I think of it now, I can remember being in the car with her, seeing her smile, and feeling like I would burst with happiness. Proverbs 16:24 reminds us, "Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones." Mrs. McBride's words had a great impact on me and still do. The feeling I had after hearing those words will never be forgotten. But what if Mrs. McBride had said, "What an ugly tree; it only has three bells on it." I would have likely remembered those words also. She made a choice: to speak kindly and with love. Her choice impacted me; since that time, sharing words of kindness and love have always come easily to me.

Dr. Charles Sophy, child psychiatrist, reminds us, "It's important to remember that children are never too young to understand. It's not just the word – it's the tone in your voice and your facial expression which gives meaning to the words. It's also your body language – the whole picture – that sends a message. Adults need to be aware of the power of the words they choose." As true as this is for parents speaking to children, it's also true as we interact with others in our church. We all expect to feel welcomed and loved in our homes; we should expect no less in our church. We make a choice every Sunday on whether or not to go to church; that choice can be greatly influenced by the welcome we receive. Do our words of welcome to others express kindness, hospitality, and love? Does our body language reflect those emotions, or is it contradictory? I'm aware that many times we share a welcome, but our tone and actions send a more powerful message: you're not really welcome here. We exchange a greeting and immediately turn our back and walk away; we share a greeting with no warmth of emotion attached to it; we greet and don't even smile at the person we're greeting. If we want others to experience God's grace and love, we must demonstrate that same love and grace in our own actions and words to all others each time we meet them.

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Even though I make a living talking, casual conversation is not always easy for me. Many times it seems it's easier to say nothing than to try to keep a conversation moving along. I'm aware of this now and work to overcome it, but I recall as a child riding in the car with my dad and silence was our only companion for miles and miles. Now, as an adult, I think back about those times and wonder how much more I would know about my father and my family if I had just made simple requests or asked simple questions like, "What was life like on the farm?" or "What did you do for fun?" In my youth, silence robbed me of knowledge. In her book, *Just Listen*, Sarah Dessen reminds us that "Silence is so freaking loud." As an adult, I mostly hear this message from silence: "You're not someone I care about or want to get to know better; you're not important to me." I think about visitors to our church and even church friends we see more regularly who we don't routinely greet warmly and with genuine love. In the case of visitors, we've probably forever lost the opportunity to commune with them; in the case of church friends, what message are we sending? Hebrews 13:1 says, "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." Hospitality should be our constant companion, shared with strangers and given to those we know.

At this time of Advent, when we all reflect on having received the most wonderful gift imaginable, the gift of a Savior, let us be reminded that we can also share a powerful gift with everyone we meet: the gift of kind and loving words. We don't know what others are going through, what may be weighing heavily on them, or what emotions others may be experiencing. Kind and loving words could be the perfect gift this season.

Please share generously!

Be Still

Eleanore Langley

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

It seems that with every passing year, we westernized people become more and more a part of the frenzy of a world filled with technology and busy-ness. Emails, texts, and tweets must be answered immediately. Holidays are filled with shopping, cooking, and traveling. There is no time for real breaks from work, from obligation, from noise. I am not one who thrives on activity; instead, I enjoy – and need – time to sit quietly with my thoughts and concerns.

The simple verse ten from Psalm 46 often seeps into my consciousness during times of stress: "Be still and know that I am God." And while this Psalm is built around proclaiming the greatness of God and his oversight in our lives – we need not fear anything or want for anything – it is the first two words of this verse that I take the more comfort from: be still. It is a command. It is a suggestion. It is a solution. It doesn't mean that we can sit back and do nothing when we are indeed called to action. However, it is a call to an action that we all should heed. Be still. Quiet our minds. Breathe. Listen. Know that God is present and active and that we can trust Him while we are still. When I find moments to steal to truly still my mind, I gain new energy to handle the next task or trial. Stillness can live in small moments and can come in a storm. Find your moments to celebrate a quieting and be still.

We Are Praying for Our Nation

Mary Lide

At least five or six times a week, I see these words. I am stopped at the intersection of Gervais and Millwood Streets, heading west on Gervais. The electronic sign for First Nazareth Baptist Church flashes the date and time and the times of their worship services, Sunday school, and Bible studies. It gives the message, "Jesus Saves." It also has the message, "We are praying for our nation."

The first time I saw the message - six or more years ago? - I thought, "It's a good thing you are because I'm not." After that, each time I was stopped at that intersection, I would wonder what were they praying for our nation? What would I pray for our nation?

Reading that sign helped me realize that I needed to be praying more and not just for our nation, but for my state, my city, my church, my family, the world. This sign influenced me to volunteer to lead a prayer group as Washington Street sought to grow spiritually.

The Tuesday morning prayer group does pray for our nation, maybe not each week. We pray for our leaders-local, state, and national-to be led by God. We don't pray for our personal political views. We pray that the people in our country will show God's love by having respect for one another and by acknowledging that we are all God's children, created in God's image.

Now when I am driving west on Gervais Street and am stopped at the intersection of Gervais and Millwood, I look for the message, "We are praying for our nation." And while I wait for the light to change to green, I pray for our nation.

Little Lamb

Mary Lide

It was the Children's Nativity. We knew what side of the church to sit on to get the best view of our little lamb, Alma Louise. She was not quite 18 months old at the time and toddled down the aisle with an older child holding her hand. Alma Louise was too cute in her hooded lamb jacket with ears and a tail. When they reached the altar, Alma Louise struggled to sit on the kneeling bench then saw the slips of paper on the carpet. While leaning over to pick up one of the papers, she toppled over head first, to her family's great amusement. Alma Louise walked over to her parents and then returned to the altar. She picked up another paper and wandered back to me. During this time, the star and Baby Jesus had appeared. Alma Louise noticed the other children facing the altar and toddled back. She climbed up on the kneeling bench, and she looked up to the star and Baby Jesus.

That year my Christmas card to close friends was the video of Alma Louise's first Christmas pageant. Besides showing off the cute little lamb, I found a deeper meaning in Alma Louise's wanderings. No matter how many times we wander and turn our backs to God, God is always glad when we return to accept His gift of never ending love.

God in Control

Alston Lippert

Then Mary said, “I am willing to be used of the Lord. Let it happen to me as you have said.” Luke 1:38 (NLV)

In the summer of 2015, I co-led a mission trip to Nakalanda, Uganda. In the two weeks we were there, we did many wonderful things, but over that time, a little eight-year-old boy named Jacob worked his way into my heart. Unfortunately, he and his sister, Betty, were not well cared for by their stepmother. After I returned home, I couldn't get Jacob out of my mind, and I felt God calling me to adopt him and his sister. Needless to say, this caused a LOT of prayer, soul-searching, family conferences, and deep conversations with friends.

After a couple of weeks of undertaking the discernment process, I decided that I would let go of the future that I had planned and envisioned and would follow God's call and adopt. As I was preparing to talk to a Uganda attorney about starting the process, I got word that Jacob and Betty's mother was in fact alive and back in Nakalanda. This news immediately shut down all thought or possibility of adoption. I wondered why God would have me undertake this exercise. I chalked it up to a test of obedience. Like Abraham being willing to sacrifice Isaac, the thing he loved most, I had been asked to give up what I tended to value most—my control, my future—but wasn't asked to go through with it.

Less than 9 months later, however, I started to understand why God had me work through the process of putting my future plans under divine direction. I was a team member on the spring Walk to Emmaus and felt God calling me (for the second time) to go into full-time ministry. Whereas the first time God issued this call, I balked because I was not willing to give up the life that I had; this time I was ready to give control of my life to God and follow the Lord's calling. In hindsight, I see that God's calling me to adopt was a trial run. God knew that I have a heart for children and would be, eventually, willing to sacrifice my future plans in order to provide a loving home for children who had won my heart. However, God also knew that after going through the process of being willing to relinquish control, it would be easier for me to accept the call into ministry. I am astonished and amazed at how far God has brought me since April 2016. I am doing things that I never would have considered just a few years ago. I also am learning anew to trust God's plan for my life and continually am finding out how good life is when God is in control.

Prayer: Lord, may we all be willing to follow wherever You lead and trust You with our future. Amen.

Finding God in the Ordinary

Beth Matthews

“There are many who say, O that we might see some good! Let the light of Your face shine on us, O Lord.”
Psalm 4:6 (NRSV)

Over the past several days, I have had a number of conversations with various people about the mundane tasks in our everyday lives: washing clothes, buying groceries, preparing meals, cleaning the kitchen, picking up the house, working in the yard, going to the same job day after day. We may even resent some of these boring tasks.

However, these recurring activities remind us that even in the most simple, mundane tasks we can experience God. Often God is waiting for us to look not beyond our daily routine but in the very midst of it to find God's goodness.

Perhaps your routine at church may be greeting others, ushering, teaching children or adults, leading committees or small groups, preparing meals, speaking a kind word to another, operating the sound system, praying for another, singing in the choir, working in the Soup Cellar, decorating for an event, sending a special note to someone, or answering the telephone. You never know how your simple acts may impact another person's life.

Our world thrives on the latest spectacle: the glitzy and grandiose! Today's verse reminds us we don't need to be splashy in our deeds, for it is often in the humdrum that we share and experience God's greatest blessings.

Prayer: Open our eyes, Lord, to see You where least expected. Amen.

The Christ Child's Star

Carole McConkey

Christmas has always been a special time for my family and me. However, on December 25, 2011, this day took on more significance when my first grandchild, Eloise, was born. What a blessing for her to share her birthday with the Christ Child!

On that particular Christmas Day, our usual celebrations were put on hold as we looked forward to meeting this precious baby. My heart was already overflowing with love for her and my hope that she would have a beautiful and happy life.

Now, six years later as I prepare for Christmas, I remember not only Eloise's birth but, of course, the birth of Christ. Placing the star on the top of our tree takes my thoughts to the shepherds and Wise Men who diligently sought the Christ Child by following the star. As we pursue a beautiful and happy life for ourselves and our loved ones, how wonderful it would be this holy season for each of us to renew our own search for the star! Remembering that star could set up a perfect plan for successful Christian living.

First, we must look up. Looking up helps us see the beauty of God's world and gives us hope, comfort, and an optimistic outlook on life. Secondly, as we look up, we will find and follow the star. Our star is Jesus, and through Him we find a good life in which we hear His voice, depend on Him, and strive to do His will. And finally, when we have Jesus in the center of our existence, we will be happy and eager to share this happiness with others. With Jesus in our hearts, His love will be reflected through us to everyone we meet.

May we all be blessed this holy season as we look up, find the star, and follow it each day of the year.

Advent and the Children's Choir

Laura and Pierce McNair

In the first few years of our marriage, Laura and I loved to travel. Although our passports would never be confused with those of true jetsetters, we did enjoy adventures in Miami, Nashville, New Orleans, Atlanta, and even London and Seville. To be perfectly honest, we were so happy with our relatively carefree life that we seriously debated whether we would ever have children.

Fittingly, though, an Advent service at Washington Street completely changed our minds about starting a family. Yes, the sanctuary was beautiful, and the message Mike Alexander delivered was heartfelt, but the performance by the Children's Choir provided the inspiration that led first to Mary Catherine and, a few years later, to Evans.

Granted, we do not make it to many Carolina games—home or away—any more, and our passports have long since expired, but the experience of raising two wonderful children makes everything else seem almost trivial. I freely admit that there are times when the drama of middle school or the insanity of Cub Scouts makes me look at Laura and say exasperatedly, "If you had not seen that children's choir," but the fact remains that nothing replaces the love and excitement Mary Catherine and Evans bring.

The season of Advent is, and has always been, special in its own right. The coming of the Christ child annually renews our hope for a better world and helps us to build a stronger faith. For us, in our house, in our little corner of the world, the magic of Advent is made even more meaningful thanks to an unforgettable performance by the Washington Street Children's Choir.

A Washington Streeter's Christmas Carol

Charlotte Owen

“They will know you are My disciples by your love for one another.” John 13:35

Many years ago, God spoke to me through Ebenezer Scrooge. Yes, that Scrooge, the one in Dickens's “A Christmas Carol.”

It's hard to admit this, but I grew up a very selfish person. Even into young adulthood, it was all about me. I was kind of judgmental, too. Then one Christmas, while I was watching “A Christmas Carol,” God got my attention through a comment spoken to Scrooge (who was also a bit selfish and judgmental.) He was a miser who was only interested in his business and making more money. He didn't care about other people one bit, until one night he was faced with his own mortality and was told, “Mankind is your business!” That may not sound profound, but to me it was a gazillion sermons rolled into one.

All of a sudden I saw how important people are to God: all people, each and every person. And I saw how He wants us to love one another and help one another. Quick as a flash, I understood: we are called to love others with an unconditional (agape) love, the same way God loves us. And it includes things like helping the poor, nursing the sick, spreading the Gospel, and whatever else we can do in our little corner.

My heart melted as I realized that mankind is MY business. A meaningful life is not acquiring more possessions, not seeking status, not just hanging out on the couch eating chocolates and watching TV. I realized it's not all about me. We are called to love one another and help one another because that's what God wants His children to do.

And, as a bonus, I was also given a word of encouragement at the ending of the story. You recall the part when everyone thinks Scrooge has lost his mind because suddenly he is very kind and generous towards others. I noticed in the movie that all those he encountered were astonished and filled with joy when they saw that Scrooge's attitude had inexplicably changed. And not one of them had any kind of negative reaction: blame, resentment, criticism. They all just accepted that he had changed his ways, and they were blessed by the new person he had become.

I know. This is just a story. But to me it is a parable. And Jesus used parables to teach us lessons. And the lesson I learned that night long ago still melts my heart whenever I think about it or see Ebenezer Scrooge. And I am very thankful to God for His unconditional love.

Advent and Renewal

Davis Powers

“Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. 2 Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the Lord’s hand double for all her sins. 3 The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: 5 And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.”

Isaiah 40:1-5

Outside of the Church, even among people who call themselves Christians, the anticipation of commercial Christmas seems to stir earlier every year. The appearance of Christmas lights and Christmas sales precedes Thanksgiving Day by weeks now, and radios and televisions scream incessantly about Black Friday. We all know that the lights, trees, sales, and gifts are rather insignificant to the true meaning of Christmas, and surely we know that the Friday following Thanksgiving Day should be black only in one small context of our lives. As surely as these things are not Christmas, Advent is not just a season that we spend trying to make them happen efficiently.

Advent is the first season of the Christian year, and, most certainly, it is followed by Christmastide. As part of the Advent season, we most rightfully and assuredly anticipate the anniversary celebration of the birth of Christ. There is another meaning to Advent, however, with which we Christians are blessed, a meaning that intensifies the anticipation of Christmastide.

Advent invokes personal and corporate introspection. It challenges us to examine the current state of the Church and of our faith, and to assess how best to institute a renewal of faith. Advent beckons us to take account of our lives, reflect on the past, count our blessings, and commit ourselves to becoming more mature in our beliefs and deeds. After all, we are preparing ourselves ostensibly for the coming of the Lord, perhaps even literally.

During Advent, we look at what we have done with this world and life that God has given us and determine what we can and should do to restore it to how we believe God would want it. That is why God sent the Savior years ago, and that is why we can, with confidence of our faith, anticipate a renewal. Whatever about us that is broken can be repaired, and chaos can be restored to order. The solution is always the same. We need look no further than the promise of Advent.

My hope for us is that we can experience a renewal similar to the first Advent; that our iniquities are pardoned, that our warfare is accomplished, that our eyes and ears are opened to the message of God. With such an Advent, the glory of the Lord for this time shall be revealed, and we will all see it together.

Living Faith Through Actions

Deborah Rowe

“Do all the good you can. By all the means you can. In all the ways you can. In all the places you can. At all the times you can. To all the people you can. As long as ever you can.” John Wesley

These words kept coming back to me after I taught a Sunday School Lesson on John Wesley. I had earlier taught a lesson on Dorcas, who used the talents that God had given her to serve His people. Those two lessons changed my direction on Faith. I was taught about Faith as a young child. I experienced Faith as an adult. But knowing, experiencing, and accepting Faith was no longer enough. I knew, in my heart, that God was calling me to put my Faith into action. He called me to seek others who felt the same desire to serve His people.

A small group of these individuals came together in early June to form the Active Faith Small Group, and together we identified needs throughout our community and worked together to provide assistance to God’s people. We have since served immigrant children, the homeless, strangers, and the evacuees of Hurricane Irma. We have grown closer together, having a common goal. God continues to provide us the vision. We continue to follow.

As a result, it is a joy to put my Faith into action. We sometimes get caught up in our own life and fail to recognize the pain and hunger of those we do not personally know. It is an act of Faith to step out from our own comfortable world into the world of strangers to see their needs and provide God’s love and service. However, the blessing of serving our God to help all of His people is a gift that I cherish. Service is not seen as a chore; it is a blessing.

My Faith journey is not over, but now I get to experience Faith as a person who is both a recipient of God’s Grace and an instrument of His love through service to others.

I Do My Best When I Am Busy

Emily Torres

Ever since I was in high school, I have been tremendously busy. Between multiple practices, club activities, and completion of assignments for all the rigorous classes I signed up for, I barely had time to breathe. Nevertheless, I completed everything on time and always to the best of my ability. My life motto became, “I do my best when I am busy.” This tradition continued through college and into my young adult life.

It wasn't until recently, that I realized that my priorities weren't exactly in line. Last year, I created a Twitter Account to connect with friends and other educators. It is what the social media world calls a “blended account,” which means it is for both personal and professional purposes. When it came time to write my 140-character biography, I prided myself in how many different activities I could list in 140 characters. I even had to use emojis to display my love of ice cream and running because I could not fit it all in.

Notice what did not make the list: Christ Follower, Active Member of Washington Street UMC, Circle 9 President, Open Door Sunday School class member, College Age Ministry Leader.

I realized that the things I listed in my Twitter biography were the aspects of my life that I think about on a daily basis. I am always stressed about teaching and the numerous student activities I am in charge of at Pelion High School. I come home to William and my puppy Casey daily. I even make time to work out each morning and relax while eating ice cream each evening.

But when do I make time for God or studying His Word? I'm ashamed to say it isn't daily. The Lord tells us many times in the Bible the importance of studying His Word. In Matthew 4:4, Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” Job stressed “I have not departed from the commands of his lips; I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my daily bread.” (Job 23:12)

I pray over this Advent season that you will join me in making time to read the Word of God a priority. It should not be considered a burden or another item on our to-do list. Instead, it should be a sacred time that we look forward to each day. The Bible makes it clear that we need the Word of God to live. We also need to treasure our time with God and reading His Word MORE than receiving our daily bread (or whatever you are putting ahead of it in your daily life.)

Service During Advent

Lois Whitaker

There are many ways in which God works in our lives, but it is the same God who does the work in and through all of us who are his." I Corinthians 12:6 (TLB)

To me, Advent is a season in which we should pause and think about becoming more active in our service to others in the coming New Year. As we await the coming of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, what more appropriate season in the Christian Church than the Advent Season to show our appreciation for our many blessings and gifts of life, health, and happiness than to seek ways in which to serve Him in kindness and service to others? In the midst of all the commercialism and gift giving, what better time to reach out and touch others who are not as fortunate as we? We can do this by sharing our talents, by providing help to the homeless and others who are down on their lots, and by visiting the sick and lonely and shut-ins. I use this season of joy and anticipation for the coming Christ child to reflect on what I have done in the past to use the talents God has given me and to plan for the future year. This is my way of growing my relationship with God..

For example, I have found great rewards and satisfaction in my music ministry of volunteering to play one-hour piano concerts for assisted living and nursing homes in the Columbia area. I have given these concerts over the past six to seven years. One of these events is for a communion service which our own ministers at Washington Street conduct once each month for one of these facilities. In my other concerts, I play Broadway show tunes and a variety of other numbers (Elvis Presley, the Beatles, Fats Domino, Louis Armstrong and others) and, of course, great religious and faith numbers ("I Believe," "Climb Every Mountain," "How Great Thou Art," "Down by the River Side," and others.) My husband, Andy, is my "sound and light" technician and sets up extra lights for me at each location so I can sight-read the various musical numbers. As but one example of how this is so gratifying for me, my reward comes when an elderly gentleman or lady comes up to me with tears in his/her eyes and says something to the effect, "You were a real blessing to us tonight," or "You brought back such wonderful memories to me tonight," or other similar responses of appreciation.

During this Holy Season, I also reflect and thank God for my German-American mother who sold vegetables from her garden to pay for my piano lessons as I was a youngster growing up in the Piedmont section of North Carolina. I had two wonderful older brothers whose job it was to drive me the three miles from our home in the small community of Sunnyside into the also small town of Bessemer City, North Carolina, to take lessons from Ms. Alma Clark Jackson, who had studied music at Meredith College in Raleigh. I know that my mother made great sacrifices for me, and I feel that my volunteer activity is but one way-and now my duty and obligation-to give back to others through my music, as I remember and thank God for my loving mother—not just during the Advent Season but all during the year.

Reverend Alston Lippert
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