



**Bethel United
Methodist Church**
Advent Devotional

Warrenton, Virginia

2020

Company is Coming!

This year's theme for Advent Worship and the Advent Devotional is "Company Is Coming." We will be using the lectionary texts as we look at the work of Advent each week – waiting and preparing.

It seems in this year of 2020, we've spent much time waiting – waiting for this virus to be defined and eliminated, waiting for the shutdown to be over, waiting for a Covid-19 vaccination, waiting for schools to open, waiting for the election to be over, waiting for our church to be open, and waiting for life to be back to normal. But this waiting has also included activity as we sought new ways to be the church, to serve our community, to live our faith and share God's love. In our waiting we have collected food and donated money to food pantries and fixed homes for those in our community who are in need; we have read our Bibles, devotionals, and UMW books and participated in Bible studies; we have connected with one another through phone calls, Zoom meetings, socially distant small group meetings, emails, and mailings; we have adjusted to new ways of worshipping and receiving communion; we have given thanks for our blessings and prayed for one another, our community, our church, our country, our leaders, and our world. Now the Advent season calls us to continue waiting – waiting for God's hope to claim a stronghold upon us more powerfully than the troubles of the world, waiting for God's peace in all of life's situations, waiting for the joy that comes from trusting in God's reign in our lives and in our world, and waiting for the new life that is possible when we keep our eyes focused on Jesus.

The waiting of Advent is not passive. We are called to do the work of preparation for Christ to be born anew in our hearts. So, as we prepare our homes with decorating, shopping, and baking, we are also called to prepare our hearts to receive the newborn king.

May these devotions inspire us to have hope and joy each day of the Advent and Christmas season through the experience of Christ who is come in our lives.



MERRY
CHRISTMAS

November 29

Company is Coming: Waiting and Preparing for Hope

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God always for you, because of God's grace that was given to you in Christ Jesus. That is, you were made rich through him in everything: in all your communications and every kind of knowledge, in the same way that the testimony about Christ was confirmed with you. The result is that you aren't missing any spiritual gift while you wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will also confirm your testimony about Christ until the end so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, and you were called by him to partnership with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Corinthians 1:3-9)

Today is the beginning of the Advent season – a season of waiting and preparing. I'm pretty good at preparing, but not so good at waiting. Patience is not one of my gifts. Maybe that's why I took up the spiritual discipline of Centering Prayer. In this prayer practice I sit quietly with God trying to still my thoughts and just "be" in the presence of God. For twenty minutes I wait with God. There have been very few times over the years that I've had a powerful "God experience" during my prayer time. Some people might say that this type of prayer doesn't "do" anything for them. But I think that's the way God works in me – slowly and deliberately when I take the time to allow God in.

How will you wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed this Advent season? Will you read the Advent lectionary passages with the call of the prophets, the words of the psalms, and the words of preparation in the epistle and Gospel readings? Will you light advent candles each week and wait with the flames of hope, peace, joy, and love? Will you listen, and maybe even sing along, to some Advent hymns in addition to the many Christmas songs and hymns already being played?

*Come, thou long-expected Jesus, born to set thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee.
Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art;
Dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart. –Charles Wesley, 1744*

I thank my God always for you, because of God's grace that was given to you in Christ Jesus. And I pray that the power of that grace grows in you this Advent season as you wait with hope for the coming of Christ.

Rev. Faith Weedling

November 30

Company is Coming: Waiting and Preparing for Hope

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit, you may abound in hope. (Romans 15:13)

Remember as a young child when Christmas was mostly about Santa and about believing and hoping you would receive what you most desired? The goal was to stay out of mischief so that you didn't get on the naughty list at least the month before Christmas. You sent a letter straight to Santa with your most treasured desires. Special presents meant so much until the newness wore off, sometimes so quickly that the boxes kept you better entertained on Christmas day.

As a Christian over the years I have found my joy not in gifts but in all the special aspects of Christmas: spending time with my church brothers and sisters at Bethel, the opportunity to sing seasonal music with the choir, the many church services honoring the birth of Jesus, the joy of giving to those in need, and the hundreds of feel good Christmas movies. Christmas is a holiday rejoicing in Jesus, who was born in a stable surrounded by animals and the shepherds, yet foretelling a gift so wonderful that it fills me with joy just remembering its promise.

This year has been extra hard for all of us as we struggle to live within a pandemic world. Not having hugs of comfort received by church members, family, and friends is a grave loss indeed. Yet there is still joy and hope in this season because no matter what happens, our faith in God will walk us through this trial.

Dear Jesus, May we count our blessings this season and dream of a life when heaven and earth are made new and God walks among His people, where "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things will be gone forever." (Revelation 21:4). Amen.

Debbie Mroczek



December 1

Company is Coming: Waiting and Preparing for Hope

From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. (Isaiah 64:4, NRSV)

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never end, they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him". (Lamentations 3:22-24, NRSV)

The theme for this first week in Advent is "Waiting and Preparing for Hope." Waiting is hard at any age. Growing up it seemed like Christmas would never come. We had an Advent Calendar that helped us count the days. We took turns opening the little doors to find the surprise. Finally, it was Christmas morning, but the waiting wasn't over yet. Santa Claus always decorated our Christmas tree, but we were not allowed to come downstairs to see the tree and open our gifts until my dad got our little train puffing smoke and chugging around the track. Oh, how we hoped it would run! Oh, how we hoped Santa had left that special gift under the tree.



Nowadays I have a tiny tree, the train disappeared during my last move, and Santa doesn't stop here anymore. Nevertheless, I still wait and I still hope. I wait to see what new opportunities to serve Him God will send this Holy Season. While I wait, I hope many new believers will follow the Star to the Christ Child. I hope our Lord Jesus Christ will renew and revitalize His church all over the world. I hope for peace, joy, and new life for all of God's beloved children.

Lord Jesus, as we wait and hope this Holy Season, let us not be complacent. Open our eyes to your presence and our ears to your voice as you lead us into new arenas of service. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Ruth Ann Campagna

December 2

Company is Coming: Waiting and Preparing for Hope

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. (Luke 2:6-7)

This could really be a bleak Christmas, couldn't it? No big parties because of social distancing and masks. Imagine Santa Claus tippy-toeing through our houses wearing a mask. Fear of going to big department stores to shop for presents. No caroling parties—they say singing expels more droplets than ordinary talking. Children have been home for the whole season and parents are exhausted from supervising virtual schooling. Not much chance to buy them special presents and smuggle them into the house without their noticing. Maybe not even a big Christmas dinner in the works. I said it could be bleak. Maybe even disastrous. The darkest Christmas of our lives.

But maybe it's a good time to think about that first Christmas—the one we've always romanticized by thinking of the shepherds and kings coming to worship the Baby Jesus, the one where mother and child are bathed in a faint glow as father Joseph stands reverently in the background.

It wasn't really such a great Christmas either, was it? I mean, in terms of lights and presents and turkey dinners. Oh, the wise men brought expensive gifts, but nothing a baby would care about—nothing like that clacking duck your auntie gave you years ago or the little tin drummer boy that really made a rat-a-tat sound as his sticks hit the drumhead. It happened when the mother and father were away from home, making a long and tedious trip to be registered as aliens in a foreign government. They were in an animal enclosure, for heaven's sake—a barn or a cave or a smelly little stall in somebody's backyard. No doctor. No sanitation. No fanfare. Just an imploding birth in a foreign environment because the fetus wouldn't wait any longer. Really bleak.





Oh, the angels sang. That is part of the story. But the earthly part isn't all that great. It's really pretty dark and sordid. We germaphobes wouldn't have liked it at all. We couldn't have waited to get somewhere where there was running water to wash our hands, scrubbing them for 20 seconds while we sang "Happy Birthday" twice.

But, you see, there's a parallel here if we'll only take note of it. We've turned Christmas into a big thing, full of lights and food and lots of presents and big celebrations with our families and friends. It wasn't that originally. It was more like what we'll have this year—something quiet and maybe dark and dismal, and without much fanfare. Maybe there will be angels in attendance this year, and, because we have to be quiet and not celebrate a lot, we'll have a chance to hear them, to experience their presence in a meaningful way.

That's the positive side of where we are now. Because it will be different, because it will be quieter and less spectacular than usual, we'll probably experience Christmas in a deeper way and feel closer to God than we normally do.

Think of that as you approach this very different kind of Christmas. Be grateful for the chance to have this thoughtful and inward kind of experience. Breathe a prayer of thanksgiving for it—and for the little child who was born so many years ago in an inconspicuous manger away from his parents' home. You might even hear the angels sing!

Father, Open our ears to the songs of the angels in our own lives and may we be thankful for the blessing you sent so long ago and the blessings you send us today.

Rev. Dr. John Killinger

December 3

Company is Coming: Waiting and Preparing for Hope

*We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.
(Hebrews 6:19-20)*

*Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.
(Hebrews 9:27-28)*

We are entering the Advent season in the church where we are remembering and celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ. He was the Son of God, and son of man; God incarnate in human flesh. As we read in the second scripture reference above, he was sacrificed to take away the sins of many, and I realized that day in July 2005 that all my church family has heard me testify to, that he died for my sins personally. I was one of the many talked about above.

Because I have my faith, believing in Jesus Christ and who he is, my hope is like an anchor for my soul as noted in the first scripture reference above. My hope is that when that second coming happens, be it at my death or at the end of times (if I am still alive then), he will save me into the Kingdom of Heaven. I am waiting for the Hope of Salvation.

Lord God, I confess that like unto the Apostle Paul, I quite often do the things I don't want to do, and don't do the things that I want to do. But my faith and hope lead me to believe that I am forgiven by you and your son, Jesus the Christ. Help me oh God, to find that path that Jesus would have me take, and walk with him on it. We will celebrate and remember his miraculous birth and entrance into the world, and will wait for the second coming with hope. Amen.

Murray Edwards

Hope

December 4

Company is Coming: Waiting and Preparing for Hope

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in (God) so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13)

Hope has been tough to stay with over this last year of 2020. From the horrors of COVID to economic uncertainty, harsh splits and hatred between many of us of differing beliefs have fractured our lives. Hope even seems to be a weak word, perhaps used only in the context of our own insights. I started to play with the word HOPE: I came up with a word for each letter.

H is for Happiness: What makes you happy right now?

Chocolate makes me happy!!

John, my husband, makes me happy!

Friends make me happy.

Bugsy, my dog, makes me happy.

Coffee makes me happy

O is for Openness: Now let that Happiness lead you to a feeling of Openness

Breathe deeper

See more

Smile broader

Receive sights

Listen for beautiful sounds

P is for Praise: As the openness expands your body, know that God's love pervades every cell of your form.

Feel the joy

Open your heart

Move into praise!

E is for Energy: Then let that praise turn your body, mind, heart, and soul into energy to celebrate HOPE IN GOD IN WHOM ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE!

Dear Father, Grant us the everlasting hope that only comes from opening our hearts to your son, Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

Rev. Beth Chadsey

December 5

Company is Coming: Waiting and Preparing for Hope

But now, Lord, you are our father. We are the clay, and you are our potter. All of us are the work of your hand. (Isaiah 64:8 CEB)

When I left home at the age of eighteen to join the Navy, I went with a boatload of doubts and anxiety. I worried about being smart enough, or strong enough, or committed enough to succeed. The first time I reported to a new training command on my own - with no one to tell me where to go or what to do - made me a nervous wreck. And I remember sitting on the pier for more than an hour just staring down at the submarine I had been assigned to, wondering what in the world ever made me think I could do this. Over the next six years I worked hard to transform myself from a boy into a sailor. I was successful, but I wasn't happy. Something was missing. I often found myself wondering "is this all there is?" Was this all there ever could be? I soon realized that I was living in today with very little hope for tomorrow.

Many years later I realized I was being transformed again; but this time there were other hands at work. I'd gotten married and had children; and had begun attending church because my wife wanted me to for the sake of our children. I never expected to meet God, but God introduced God's self to me anyway. Slowly, I began to believe in and trust God's promises. I understood for the first time that this world isn't all there is. Not only that, but the world - and I - could be so much more. I understood that was what God wanted for the world and for all people everywhere, and even for me; and trusting in God's love and grace, I now thankfully live in today always hoping for a joyous tomorrow.

Almighty and everlasting God, thank you for your love and grace that nurtures and grows our trust in you and the promises you've made, so that we can live joyously in the hope we have in you. Thank you for the gift of your Son Jesus Christ, who lived, died, and rose again to redeem creation. Give us the strength, courage, and commitment to live this life in the sure and certain hope of the life yet to come. These things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.



Rev. Steve Weedling

December 6

Company is Coming: Waiting and Preparing for Peace

And let the peace of Christ, to which you were also called in one body, rule your hearts. And be thankful. (Colossians 3:15)

For more than twenty years my neighbor and I have not spoken, not in a civil manner anyway. But God was speaking. In a recent sermon by Pastor Faith, a builder was hired to build a fence between two feuding brothers' lands. However, instead of a fence, he built a bridge over the creek that divided their properties. This bridge assisted the brothers in repairing their relationship. And then God spoke again in a Bible study that covered the extensions of God's commands by Jesus: in particular one of the two most important concerning love for one's neighbor. Now I realize that referring to neighbor is a generic word that refers to everyone. In my case it happens she is next door and up the hill from me.

Given the sermon and the Bible study, I have thought very much about how it applies to me. I attempted, unsuccessfully, to reach out to my neighbor in person. I then sent a letter offering her my sincere apology for what I had done to annoy her that had created our situation, to ask for her forgiveness, and to share my hope in the future that we can at least speak and wave to the other as our paths cross. While she still chooses to ignore me, I feel relieved that I have followed Jesus' teaching of loving each other in peace and harmony.

Below is a prayer I discovered that I pray particular to this situation and for peace throughout the world.

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace;
Where there is hatred, let me sow charity;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is error, the truth;
Where there is doubt, the faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light; and
Where there is sadness, joy.
O, Divine Master, Grant that I may not so much seek
To be consoled, as to console;
To be understood as to understand;
To be loved as to love;
For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
And it is in dying to ourselves that we are born to eternal life. Amen.*

Gary Pinson

December 7

Company is Coming: Waiting and Preparing for Peace

I will listen to what God the Lord will say; he promises peace to his people, his saints – but let them not return to folly Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other. (Psalm 85:8,10 NIV)

I've spent a lot of time over the years waiting at Christmastime. Waiting for family and friends to finally give me their Christmas lists. Waiting in line in the stores. Waiting to see if someone sent me a Christmas card (or not) so I could decide whether to send them one (or not.) Oh, come on – you know you do it too! Waiting in line at the post office to mail packages. Always, always waiting.

The waiting was stressful, but it always culminated in something that would ultimately bring joy and a complete sense of peace and contentment. For decades, from my childhood until the year before my mom died, our family celebrated Christmas at our country cabin in upstate New York. Once my brother and I hit our twenties and were off on our own, that meant that my parents, my brother, and I all had to drive separately for the harrowing two hour commute from different parts of New York City to the Catskill Mountains, often at night, and often in the snow. My car would be filled with presents and two yowling Siamese cats, helping me sing Christmas carols as we eagerly awaited seeing my parents and brother and celebrating Christmas with them. Once I arrived, I was never at peace until everyone else had safely arrived, too. Only then could I finally exhale and experience that glorious feeling of relief, love, and anticipation of the joys to come and knowing the peace that our Lord offers. Aaaaah.

That was then. This is now. I have no one to wait for at Christmas anymore. I still wait in lines, but they're the socially-distanced, six feet apart kind, and there's no sense of peace waiting for me at the end of them – except, perhaps, the peace that comes from knowing that I won't have to ration my toilet paper anymore for at least a while. I wait, and we all wait, for the time when COVID-19 finally starts to dissipate for good, and we can all get back to whatever we try to remember "normal" once meant. Does it mean a more peaceful, relaxed time? What was that like? And I wait – yes, we all wait – for a time when politics isn't all we talked or thought about, or tried not to talk or think about, even though it's been the elephant in the room for too many years now and it's driving friends, families, and congregations apart. Will we ever be able to go back to the way it was, when no one knew, or even cared, what our neighbor's political leanings are?



Peace. That is indeed what we're waiting for. Yearning for. Like most things, it doesn't come easily, but it's there for us if only we seek it through God. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you," Jesus said. "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid." (John 14:27, NIV.) We are certainly not finding any peace in worldly things these days, so we must look elsewhere. Behold! Jesus is himself our Prince of Peace! We need look no further than him and his teachings, and to really listen, and really do as he says. He gave us peace. It's here in our hearts. Now we have to go find it and use it to help others find theirs.

Thank you, Father, for all the blessings you've given us, and especially for the memories of peaceful and happy Christmases long ago. Help us still to find your peace amidst all the stresses that our current world is throwing at us. And, once found, let us not return to our former ways, but help us to find peaceful solutions to the ever-present conflicts in our hearts and in our world. Amen.

Catherine Carayas

December 8

Company is Coming: Waiting and Preparing for Peace

Recently I read an article that was published by “Home School Compass” that I printed out to share with my family. I thought I would share some of the ideas with my Bethel family. It reminds us that the first Christmas was a very joyous and simple celebration. The celebration was in a stable with no food, no tree, and no lights. The article explains how we can prepare ourselves to have a peaceful Christmas season and truly celebrate the birth of Our Savior and the blessings he has given us. It makes suggestions to make a Christmas season that is filled with joy and peace and gives us a sense of orderliness and calmness. “Chaos cannot possibly bring the peace that was promised by the angels to those upon whom the Lord’s favor rests.” Let’s try to get rid of the panic and chaos of the season for a season of peace and delight.

Reduce distractions and eliminate traditions that are not that important to the family. Sometimes we do things out of habit. We do things that not everyone enjoys or things that are not that important to the season. Consider what you could do as a family to keep the message of Christ in Christmas. This article suggested the following questions to ask your family members. I tried this activity and I loved the reactions I got. This activity will let us know the important things to our family and not what we think is important.

- **What are your favorite things that we do around Christmas time?** Getting a real tree with my children and grandchildren. Decorating our house; the first decorations that I put up are gifts given to me by my Grandmother Gray—a complete manger scene and a set of cloth bells that she made. Deciding as a family who will receive our “Christmas Jar” money. Shopping with my daughter and my grandchildren for the Christmas Shoeboxes and the Angel Tree recipients. Making cookies and decorating a gingerbread house with my grandchildren.
- **Whom do you enjoy spending time with during Christmas?** My children, grandchildren, family and friends.
- **What was your favorite gift to give last year?** Mary Beth’s (my daughter) and Sarah’s (my daughter-in-law) jewelry boxes. Each year I shop all year for jewelry for them and put it all in a Christmas box. They look forward to this box every year.
- **What was your favorite gift that you received last year?** I could not remember the gift, but I remember the wrapping paper was made by my grandchildren. I saved it because it was so special to me.
- **What foods do you always associate with Christmas?** Turkey, Ham, Oysters, Sweet Potatoes, Dressing, Corn Pudding, Pumpkin Pie, Cookies
- **What things do we do as a family for the holidays that you really do not enjoy?** Taking down the tree and the decorations.

I also interviewed Ronnie, Mary Beth, and my grandsons—Rett and Riley. My heart was filled with so much joy at their answers.

Focus on keeping Christ in Christmas. Here are some activities the article suggested:

- Go Christmas caroling in your neighborhood or to a nursing home (outside)
- Have a “Happy Birthday, Jesus” party
- Sponsor an “Angel Tree” child
- Create boxes for Operation Christmas Child
- Make a homemade Advent calendar. Each day select a Scripture verse or a Christmas song

Limit consumerism in your home. Share Christmas stories that your family could read together. Often this will give us insight into different ways of sharing our love.

- Look through your pantry. Do you have things you can use to make special treats for gifts?
- Make a scrapbook for each child.
- “Shop at home.” There may be gifts that can be shared.
- Purchase things your family may need anyway—turn them into Christmas gifts. Wrap up your child’s favorite treats as a gift.
- Make gift certificates that can be redeemed throughout the year. Maybe a date night gift certificate, a “get-out-of-a chore” pass, a play date pass with a parent(s) certificate. You can also make gift certificates for other family members, for example “coupons” for house cleaning, yard work, grocery shopping, or babysitting. Grandparents can give certificates for “movie night,” a day to bake and make cookies, or take a walk.

Announce a “de-cluttering” challenge. We all have things we no longer need that others may need and appreciate. All family members can participate in this activity. Decide as a family with whom you will share these items.

Be responsible with your finances. Commit to only spending a predetermined budget amount. You could change the way you choose gifts for your children. This is the “three gift” rule (which was inspired by the three gifts Christ received from the wise men). Perhaps limit gifts to something to read, something to wear, something to play, and some to share (extending the giving to others).

Make decisions ahead of time. Use a notebook or binder to organize your information.

- Decide your budget and make a gift list
- Review your holiday schedule and menu and think about what food will need to be prepared
- Prepare a schedule for household duties for everyone
- Decide if and to whom you will send Christmas cards and if you will have a family picture made
- Discuss with your family what traditions are important to your family

Delegate tasks to capable people. Even our Lord delegated responsibilities. None of us can do it all ourselves. It is too overwhelming.

- What can be delegated to the children?
- What can you complete on-line (gift certificates, gifts, or groceries)?
- Who can organize the gift wrap supplies? Who can wrap the gifts?
- Who can check your pantry early enough to shop?

Nourish yourself with God’s word. Make sure to make time each day to devote to your spiritual life as you prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ. The author shared, “A sweet time spent with the Lord each day may be the very best thing you can do to celebrate the entry of the Savior into the world.”

These suggestions will help us as we prepare for the birth of Jesus Christ; it will allow us to prepare peacefully. It will help us prepare for and celebrate peace. Recently Duane Williamson blessed us and shared the song “Let There Be Peace on Earth.” It reminded us that it begins with us. Let’s all remember this during this season.

The following are Scriptures that we could devote time to read as we prepare for peace. Find a quiet place and peacefully read and think about these passages; maybe read them as a family and discuss them: Isaiah 40: 1-11; Psalm 85: 1-2, 8-13; Mark 1: 1-8

Dear Lord, We celebrate you during this season of your birth. Please help us to celebrate peacefully and appreciate what your birth means to us. Please help us appreciate what is truly important to you and our family. You have blessed us and our family in so many ways; please be with us as we share our blessings with others. We love you as you love us. Happy Birthday! Amen

Sandra Colvin

December 9

Company is Coming: Waiting and Preparing for Peace

The LORD gives strength to his people; the LORD blesses his people with peace. (Psalm 29:11)

I was in a little village in Northern Ireland one cold and damp November evening. You could smell the peat burning in fireplaces, taking the edge off the chill and creating islands of warmth in small homes throughout the town. I gladly entered into one of those homes and found the gray outside was banished and the inside was full of light and cheer.

I was the President of a peace program in Northern Ireland that sought reconciliation through Protestant and Catholic children being brought to the United States to live together in American homes for the summer. I was attending a local reception of families participating in the program. There was a lot of laughter ringing through the house...whenever two or more Northern Irish gathered, laughter would soon ring out...something I found puzzling in the middle of the Troubles at that time. Driving to the home there I had passed a checkpoint with heavily guarded troops and saw a patrol with machine guns at the ready going down the street.

As I was greeted, another couple came into the house and I saw that the husband was openly crying with tears streaming down his face. I immediately went to him and asked what was wrong. He said, "I have lived in this village all my life and never have I been in the home of someone of the other religion. This is truly wonderful."

Peace happened that chilly night in a small place in a small country and it was beautiful to behold.

God blesses us with peace and the strength to live in it if we are willing to walk through doors of reconciliation. Things may look gray and uninviting but inside, yes, inside there is light and cheer that will surprise you.

O God, I thank you for the peace you place in our hearts and minds this Christmas season. May that peace and the joy it brings be born anew in our lives today. In Christ's name, Amen.

Rev. John Chadsey



December 10

Company is Coming: Waiting and Preparing for Peace

Be still and know that I am God; I will be exalted in the nations, I will be exalted in the earth. (Psalm 46:10 CEB)

Early one November morning, when we were experiencing unusually mild weather, I was sitting in a rocking chair with a cup of tea on our screened-in porch. The view from my chair was remarkably beautiful -- the still, tranquil pond, surrounded by trees whose leaves had turned golden. It was so quiet that I could hear individual leaves from our maple tree gently landing on the ground. That's when Psalm 46:10 came to me, in its beautiful simplicity and power.



I was exhausted from the worries of the last few weeks: fears about COVID-19 and our loved ones whom we haven't been able to see in months; the uncertainty of the presidential election; and health concerns. I recognize that I am blessed and also realize that others have far greater burdens to bear that can seem magnified in this season. Losing a loved one, financial concerns, loss of employment, difficult diagnoses, broken promises, and broken relationships are all realities in our fallen world.

This verse reminds us to stop being anxious and stop trying to solve problems on our own. The message is to "be still," and to trust in God, our refuge and our strength. We need to constantly acknowledge who God is and what he can do. Our challenge is to be patient, and to rest in the assurance that God is in charge. As we prepare our hearts to receive the gift of Christ Jesus this Christmas, let us prepare for the peace that only God can provide. Ultimately, we will have peace in God's presence in heaven, but we can come to Christ now, in our everyday lives, and he will give us peace. We just need to stop and to ask. Shalom.

Lord, we acknowledge that you are to be exalted in all of the earth. Please forgive us for thinking that we can handle things on our own. We come to you at this moment, breathing a sigh of relief for your promises, and we recommit right now to "be still and know that you are God." Please bring us peace. Amen.

Janet Miles

December 11

Company is Coming: Waiting and Preparing for Peace

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:17-18 NIV)

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness. (James 3:17-18 NIV)

This year, unlike any other year of my life, I made a decision. This decision has allowed me to open up --or should I say wake up? Sometime this year, around the end of March, I found myself filled with anxiety to the point of sweating. I noticed this while in a grocery store. When I got home, I tried to rationalize what caused this. I prayed. I asked, discussed, and communicated to those known and unknown to me. I even talked to somebody I just met at a dealership waiting for car repairs. I enjoyed the answers that I was receiving, mostly from the strangers, just everyday people who did not know me nor did I know them.

Then I turned off all social media, news, current events --you name it. I cut it off and eliminated it. I run a business, so through social media groups, I get work. I have somebody to handle advertising, social media requests, etc.

After about five weeks or so, my work and health were severely impacted. Bills were piling up with very little money coming in. I can say I was a little concerned, mostly for my wife because she has a tendency to worry.

I was at a job in the Upperville area on the Friday of Memorial Day weekend. I got home that evening around 7 o'clock. I was in my office when I heard my wife's phone ring. My house is small so I could easily hear her voice change during the phone conversation. Mark, her younger brother, died that day in a motorcycle accident. My wife immediately went to her mother's home in Maryland and stayed for quite a few days. I did not leave the house for quite some time after the news that Friday night. I could continue talking about things that transpired that same day and days following Mark's death. It was hard.

The decision I made to keep outside sources, negative energy as I call it, out of my life helped me through these past months as I was able to focus, truly focus, without distractions of past, current, or future events. I continue to work on my faith, sharing with others in many ways by listening, absorbing, and giving more now than ever before.

I would like to share some lyrics I jotted down on the way to church one November morning. It was so good to be actually present, sitting in a pew!

*In my bondage, God, you are my power.
My seasons change, you stay the same.
You are the God of all grace.*

*Tried to make it on my own
Crashing to the ground
There was Jesus.*

*Even when I did not know it, did not see it,
There was Jesus.*

*I'm not meant to understand.
My savior lives, loves
Always there for me,
Always going to be.*

*Because I have seen, Praise the Lord!
If you're still alive and breathing, Praise the Lord!*

Dear Father, I want to focus on each encounter with faith, family, and friends, known and unknown to me, every second of the day. I think of us as a family, sometimes like a pathway of least resistance, for the spirit flowing, bringing God's gift through Jesus our Savior! Bless us all. Amen.

A Bethel Brother in Christ



December 12

Company is Coming: Waiting and Preparing for Peace

He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young. (Isaiah 40:11)

It took me an exceptionally long time to sit and type this devotional. In this very strange time, I could not seem to bring myself to look back on long ago memories. I just was not emotionally comfortable going there. I started to think about the weeks of Advent, and their themes, and Peace is the theme I feel like I can share about.

Christmas eve has typically been an incredibly busy day for our family. I am sure many families can say the same. It seems like there are never-ending hours of baking, planning, shopping, wrapping, visiting, caroling, gingerbread house building, worshiping, attending Gum Drop Square, special events, seeing Santa, and the list goes on.

I know what you are thinking now, "Isn't this supposed to be about peace?" I promise we are getting there. There is so much that we parents put pressure on ourselves about during the holidays, and the culmination is Christmas day. For me, there is this amazing moment of peace that happens in the wee hours of Christmas Day. Since the kids were small, we have had a Christmas Eve sleepover in our room. This was a lot easier when I only had two toddlers; now we have to draw a map for sleeping. When we have arrived home for the night the hustle and bustle continue with sleeping preparations. After the story has been read, the cookies laid out for Santa, the kids have been put to bed, and Levi and I have put out our presents to the children, but before we go to bed (and allow Santa to do his thing), there is this amazing moment when I sit in our living room and breathe. It is really in that moment that I have always felt the presence of the Lord. The air is still and silent, but the lights glow. There is nothing left for me to do but just be still, and thankful for all the things the Lord has provided for me. This includes giving the world his Son. When I am done taking it all in, I crawl into whatever corner of my room is left for me and there it is again, just an overwhelming peace. Every year it is the same feeling; how blessed am I?

Father, May we be filled with the wonder of Mary, the obedience of Joseph, the joy of the angels, the eagerness of the shepherds, the determination of the magi, and the peace of the Christ child. Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit bless us now and forever. Amen. — Author Unknown

Rikki Brown

UNTO US A Child
IS BORN



December 13

Company is Coming: Waiting and Preparing for Joy

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.... (Isaiah 61:1)

My sister, JoAnn, lived with us for about 14 years before she passed away of cancer in 2018. She resided in our downstairs apartment and was a very good tenant, in that she was very kind, quiet, and considerate. At times, we hardly even knew she was there. She was always generous with her cooking and often invited us to dine with her in her apartment. JoAnn always made sure we gave thanks to our Heavenly Father before we ate.

JoAnn (or Jo as we called her as a kid in WVa), had a child when she was 17 years old and a senior in high school. Despite this challenge, Jo was able to keep up her schooling and graduated with her graduating class in 1953. However, when a childless couple in the neighborhood reached out to her, Jo put the child up for adoption because of the struggles of being a single mother in the 1950s. This couple adopted Jo's daughter when she was less than a year old and one of the conditions of the adoption was that Jo would never contact the daughter. However, the couple agreed to periodically apprise Jo of her daughter's progress and well being. The adopted parents provided the daughter with an opportunity to earn a college degree, and she eventually became a grammar school teacher in WV.

Approximately 40 years later, after the death of the adopted parents, Jo and her daughter were reunited, and this truly brought a lot of joy into their lives. My heart would ache throughout the years knowing Jo was hurting inside during the separation from her daughter. I admire her for keeping the promise to the adopted parents and to her daughter by upholding the no-contact agreement.

Jo married a fine young man who was a WWII Veteran. Sadly, her husband passed away at the young age of 57 because of alcoholism. During her time with him, she had many struggles trying to keep him sober through crisis intervention to no avail. I think that is when she really sought out the Lord to deal with her broken heart over the loss of her husband and child. Subsequently, when our father and our brother became ill, she dedicated her life to taking care of them. Both were widowed, and JoAnn became a true caregiver.

During Jo's residence with us, she was employed by a local nursing home as a receptionist. She observed many patients being neglected by staff and that really bothered her. Frequently, she took it upon herself to correct those matters because of her concern for their welfare, safety, and love of the residents. For example, one patient needed eyeglasses. Jo took it upon herself to do what should have been done by the nursing home staff.

I often look back on when Jo worked for the *Agency On Aging*. *Jo always went above and beyond her assigned duties to take care of the elderly because it was in her heart to serve all of those in need.*

Before Jo passed away, and unbeknownst to us, she had left some money for people that she knew were struggling financially. Some of these people were extended relatives, and Jo gave according to their need. She was indeed a true caregiver for the downtrodden, always caring for those in need.

These are just a few examples of my sister Jo's love and caring for others. I know her life was pleasing to our Heavenly Father. I see and hear about so many Bethel Church members performing the same acts of true love, dedication, and concern for their fellow men and women in need in our church and community. Like Jo, they never mention it. The best part is that I know our Heavenly Father sees their good deeds and they will be rewarded when they reach their eternal home.

Father, Give us the heart of my sister, Jo, bringing love and care to those hurting this Advent season. As we prepare for Jesus' birth, let us make ready for his coming by binding up the brokenhearted, freeing those held captive by sin and want, and bringing light to those held in darkness. Amen.

Ken Adams



December 14

Company is Coming: Waiting and Preparing for Joy

Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:8-9)

The definition of joy, according to one source, is great pleasure and happiness. As we wait and prepare for joy, shouldn't we also consider joy while we wait and prepare? During the season of Advent, our waiting and preparing are centered around the birth of Jesus. And our joy in celebrating should begin right now during this season, before and after. Anticipation is part of this joy. It comes from within; grasp it to develop your joy through faith in God. Be grateful when your joy comes easily because during times of distress and sadness, we need to really search for it. As we wait and prepare for the birth of the Christ Child, let us be aware of the joy around us. And with that in mind, we can sing:

*Joy to the world! the Lord is come;
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare him room,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven, and heaven, and nature sing.*

*Joy to the world! the Saviour reigns;
Let men their songs employ;
While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat, repeat the sounding joy.*

*He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders, wonders, of His love. (Isaac Watts, 1719)*

*Father, Bring us joy this Advent season and may we freely share that joy with others.
Amen.*

Delores Goff



December 15

Company is Coming: Waiting and Preparing for Joy

*When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed.
Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy.
Then it was said among the nations, "The Lord has done great things for them."
The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.
Restore our fortunes, Lord, like streams in the Negev.
Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy.
Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow,
Will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them. (Psalm 126)*

Christmas has always been the time of year when I find the most joy. When I was growing up, all the other kids seemed to really thrive at summertime but not me. I loved the Christmas season. Around December 1st, I would almost always become flooded with the feeling that, no matter what was going on in life, everything would be okay because Christmas was almost here! After that, I could find joy everywhere-- little joys like my favorite Christmas songs on the radio or a candy cane from the teacher, and big joys like getting to have some time off of school and getting to see family I didn't get to see often. It also felt like other people could feel it too -- the anticipation of celebration, endings and beginnings, a chance at a fresh start.

As I have gotten older, that feeling of joy for the season has reduced but it hasn't disappeared. Despite all the ways the Christmas season can be painful, there is so much joy to be found in this season of renewal and relief. The year is almost over and a new one is about to begin. There is much to celebrate! And what a beautiful reason for celebration God gave us by sending us Jesus - a renewal, relief, and joy for the world.

I know that this Christmas season is probably going to be more difficult than it has been in years past, but I encourage us all to look for the joy of the season and share it with one another, even though it has to be at a distance. I am sending you all love and joy this holiday season and hopefully we can all be together again soon.

Almighty God, Thank you for all the joys, big and small, to be found this Christmas. Please continue to be with us in this season of renewal and relief. Even though we cannot be together physically, thank you for always being with us and for bringing us together at Bethel. Amen.

Sarah Hundley

December 16

Company is Coming: Waiting and Preparing for Joy

Our mouths were suddenly filled with laughter; our tongues were filled with joyful shouts...Yes, the LORD has done great things for us, and we are overjoyed. (Psalm 126:2a,3 CEB)

When I was going through the change from child to adolescent, I was—like a lot of others at that time in their life—moody and preoccupied with what I thought I wanted. I can remember lots of times my parents would say it was time to get ready to go to some event or another, and I really didn't want to go. It didn't matter what the event was or who was involved, I simply didn't want to go anywhere I felt like I was being made to go against my wishes. I would argue and whine; and I'd put on a really awful pouty face; and I'd do my best to get my parents to understand just how much I really didn't want to go wherever it was we were going. It never helped, I always ended up having to go anyway. So, I would give them the silent treatment all the way there. But, no matter how much I didn't want to go where we went, I always ended up having a great time once we were there! My parents had been offering an opportunity for joy; and I had been stubbornly resisting it. Turns out it wasn't them who stood in the way of my joy— it was me.

Scripture reveals that God is also continually inviting us to moments of great joy. Unlike my parents, God does not force us to walk with him – we are free to choose other paths. Lamentations 5 verse 15 reveals that when we do that, our “joy [will leave] our heart; our dancing [will change] into lamentation.” That's not what God intends or wants for us. God wants us to choose to walk humbly with God; to love as God loves; and to participate in the holy work God calls us to. Philippians 4 verses 4 and 5 say “be glad in the Lord always! Again I say, be glad! Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people. The Lord is near.” Galatians 5 verses 22 and 23a say that “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control.”

Almighty and everlasting God – fill us with your Spirit so that we may learn to walk humbly with you along the path that leads to light and life. Empower and encourage us, Lord, to share the love and grace you pour into us so that we may willfully and gratefully share it with others in our families, communities, and beyond into all the world. Overwhelm us with the joy of your presence. These things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.



Rev. Steve Weedling

December 17

Company is Coming: Waiting and Preparing for Joy

Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.” (Psalm 126: 5-8)

This year I wrote an Advent story that begins only weeks before the devotional I wrote last year. It began on November 14, 2005. This was the day that marked exactly one year left in my enlistment in the United States Navy. I was stationed overseas, in Yokosuka, Japan. When I reached my one year mark, I began counting the days. This was my first thought every morning when I woke up. Now, I do not regret my time in the Navy, but I missed my family and my friends dearly. The harbors, skyscrapers, and 10-story sprawl of Yokosuka and Tokyo were a far cry from the backroads I grew up on.

Thinking back, I think I really enjoyed the wait itself. It brought a kind of gravity to every single day. Every day had meaning, direction. I know that I intentionally drew this out, namely in the manner by which I came home. You see, at the end of my enlistment, they had arranged for me to take a plane home. Our ship had switched home ports from Yokosuka, Japan and was now in San Diego, California. I opted to make my return to Virginia by train. Maybe I was struggling with parting with my ritualistic counting; maybe I had grown attached to the wait itself; or maybe I just wanted to dramatize my return as much as possible. Either way, I had drawn my farewell to the Navy into an extended three day long moment.

I was picked up by my mother and sister at a Manassas train station. The weeks afterwards were a blessing from God. I feel and see God everywhere in my life. In the rolling hills of Fauquier County, in Luke and Isla, in my education, my career, and in my relationships with everyone at Bethel. Each one of those blessings required waiting and preparation. I see God's blessings in my current wait and preparation. Our wait, our patience can be prayerful. Just as our children stare at the beautifully wrapped boxes under the tree, anticipating gifts, there is value and joy in the wait itself. Yes, our blessings come from God, and to him we give thanks, but He is just as much with us in our prayerful patience as He is in the moments of joy when our blessings come to fruition.

Lord, our Heavenly Father, forgive us for our impatience. Remind us that when we wait, we do so with You. Remind us that you are with us always, in moments of joy as well as in moments of quiet preparation. Thank you God, for your presence, your love, and your power. Amen.

Matt Gibson

December 18

Company is Coming: Waiting and Preparing for Joy

Rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again; Rejoice! (Philippians 4:4 NIV)

REJOICE

*Isn't life glorious! Isn't it grand!
Here – take it- hold it tight in your hand;
Squeeze every drop of it into your soul,
Drink of the joy of it, sun-sweet and whole!
Laugh with the love of it, burst into song!
Scatter its richness as you stride along!
Isn't life splendid – and isn't it great
We can always start living – it's never too late!
- Helen Lowrie Marshall*

One of my favorite hymns is “Rejoice, the Lord is King.” I’m not sure why I like it so much but I just do. David and I used it as a congregational hymn at our wedding, and I would challenge you to take in the feeling of joy as you sing it the next time in church. The words are wonderful and the music is just so majestic and JOYFUL.

Maybe I like it also because I see my name within its title. People always notice that my name is spelled Joice instead of Joyce. My mom could not recall how my name got to be spelled that way. Maybe the doctor couldn't spell but that is how it appears on my birth certificate so that is how I claim the spelling officially. I didn't know until I was 18 that it wasn't spelled Joyce so I spent my formative years being Joyce and then I became Joice. Either way I give thanks each day that my Savior has given me cause to be filled with Joy(ce) and to (re)Joice always.

Two good things for all of us to remember, don't you think?

Heavenly Father, Remind us to “Rejoice (because) the Lord is King, Your Lord and King Adore, mortals, give thanks and sing, and triumph evermore. Lift up your heart, lift up your voice, rejoice; again I say rejoice.” Amen. (from Charles Wesley and John Darwall)

Joice Fredenburgh

Rejoice
in the Lord always.
Philippians 4:4

December 19

Company is Coming: Waiting and Preparing for Joy

After the king was settled in his palace and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, he said to Nathan the prophet, "Here I am, living in a house of cedar, while the ark of God remains in a tent."

Nathan replied to the king, "Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the Lord is with you." (2 Samuel 7:1-3 NIV)

King David, finally being at rest from years of war, considered how he might best employ his leisure and prosperity in the service of God. In his God-given wisdom he designed and prepared a temple for the Ark of the Covenant. And Nathan, as a godly man, encouraged David.

I remember in my first year of coaching youth softball I unintentionally started a tradition that stuck with the young ballplayers. It involved having a word we could remember that was ours, that made us come together as a Team. The word was "encouragement." We were a real Team, not because we won a lot of ball games, but because we were an encouraging Team, a Team preparing ourselves for hard work on the field. And still, if someone made an error out there, another Team member was there to pat him on the back and say...or yell across the infield... "Encouragement!" That frown would turn upside down into a smile in a heartbeat. In church, or in our other Youth activities, if someone was in need or had a problem "Encouragement!" became the mantra. Call it a verbal "We've got your back," and as a Team we always had one another's back, on and off the field.

As an adult I still believe in Team, yes with a very capital T. And for me, now I prosper as a family man and a grandfather, and life is very good. But it's not the time to stop being ready and preparing for the next tough challenge in life; instead there's always a time to yell out "Encouragement!" It's still time to do something for God. It's time to honor our commitment of baptism to Jesus as our Savior and Lord. It's time to serve others as fruitfully as each of us is able in God's name.

I have a loving family and home, but it's time to build a bigger home for God's people in my community and ENCOURAGE the rest of my TEAM...my family, my friends, my church...to prepare, to join in, and help.

Dear Father, I share David's dream to build a house, a mighty temple for You; not of brick and mortar alone, but a grander place constructed out of love and faith from this world community of ours, adorned with the greatest trappings of giving any souls can give and with a craftsmanship of devoted service to others. As an encouraging Team I know we can pull this off under any circumstances. Amen

Donald Otey

December 20

Company is Coming: Waiting and Preparing for New Life

In the passage of Luke 1:26-33, we read about Christ's birth announcement to Mary. The angel Gabriel was sent to Mary, a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph of the house of David. Now Mary naturally questioned Gabriel saying how can that be since I do not know a man? Gabriel replied "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God. Now indeed, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren." Then Mary said, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." (Luke 1:38) **For with God nothing will be impossible.**

Now imagine this. He, the almighty God of the universe, chose a virgin girl from a little town called Nazareth to give birth to Jesus. Visualize getting a message from an angel saying you were going to give birth to the Son of God. **For with God nothing will be impossible.**

I love everything about Christmas: sending Christmas cards, the Christmas carols, putting decorations out, baking cookies, and shopping for gifts for my family and friends. I enjoy the Hallmark Christmas movies that always have a happy ending, but most of all I love going to church to worship on the birthday of the Son of God. He was our perfect gift. How could a tiny, fragile baby change the world?

Over the year, life becomes bumpy with obstacles. We might be drowning in bills, sickness, poverty, fear, abuse, addiction, overwork, depression, or any number of things. But God is always there to throw us a lifeline to keep us from sinking. **For with God nothing will be impossible.**

The Year 2020 has not been an easy year for any of us. Christmas will not be the same this year. The Corona 19 Virus hit the country early in the year. There have been a lot of obstacles. Due to a lockdown jobs and businesses have been lost. Schools have been closed. The virus has caused many illnesses and deaths. Now a vaccine has been developed by two companies and is in the trial stage. They predict it will be ready for distribution soon. Thanks be to God. **For with God nothing will be impossible.**

There will need to be a change in the way we celebrate the holidays this year due to the Corona 19 Virus restrictions. We may not be able to celebrate in our church as we have before, but God is always with us.

Dear God, Thank you for sending your son, Jesus Christ, the perfect gift. How great it is to know that you are always in control. Amen.

Georgianna Schallenberger

December 21

Company is Coming: Waiting and Preparing for New Life

Children are a gift from the Lord; they are a reward from him. (Psalm 127:3)

Shortly after Thanksgiving 2017 we were blessed with the news of a baby on the way. He was not only our first, but the first child of the next generation for our families. We were eager to share the news with family and friends, but we tamed our eagerness with a plan to share this news with our family over Christmas.

We planned for individual announcements for each of the grandparents no matter their location. Upon arrival to Virginia from North Carolina, we shared the blessing with my parents and then traveled to New York to share with Alice's mom and dad. Soon after, we shared our news with extended family and friends.

Scotty, as most of you know, is two years old and has now been baptized as part of God's family and our Bethel Church. As we live our year here in Kansas, he eagerly watches "Pastor Faith" every Sunday. He gets the most excited when he sees Granny and Gramps (Rosanne and Duane) on the screen too.

As we approach this Christmas, we remain apart from our families due to our military commitments and await the birth of another child, a son. We could not be more blessed in this time of uncertainty in the world. The love and support of Jesus, our Father, Bethel Church, and our family is felt across the country.

Christmas to us has and will always be about children. Like God's gift of the Christmas child, Jesus, all children are a blessing to those touched by their presence. The light of Christmas shines through all of God's children. May your heart feel the love, light, and blessings from the Lord this season. Alice, Scotty, and I wish all of you the merriest of Christmases. Please stay safe and healthy.

Dear Jesus,

Thank you for the joy of Christmas lights, family, and the presence of your love as we celebrate your birth. Please bless all children of the world. Thank you for our families near and far. Please look over us with your never ending love. Amen.

Greg Steinmeyer
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas



December 22

Company is Coming: Waiting and Preparing for New Life

Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near. (Revelation 1:3)



"Twas the night before Jesus came
And all through the house
Not a creature was praying, not one in the house.
Their Bibles were lain on the shelf without care
In hopes that Jesus would not come there.
The children were dressing to crawl into bed,
Not once ever kneeling or bowing a head.
And mom in her rocker with baby on her lap
Was watching the Late Show while I took a nap.
When out of the east there arose such a clatter,
I sprang to me feet to see what was the matter.
Away to the window I flew like a flash
Tore open the shutters and threw up the sash.
When what to my wondering eyes should appear
But angels proclaiming that Jesus was here.
With a light like the sun sending forth a bright ray
I knew in a moment that this must be the day.
The light of his face made me cover me head
It was Jesus returning just like he had said.
And though I possessed worldly wisdom and wealth,
I cried when I saw him in spite of myself.
In the book of life which he held in his hand
Was written the name of every saved man.
He spoke not a word as he searched for my name;
When he said "it's not here," my head hung in shame.
The people whose names had been written with love
He gathered to take to his Father above.
With those who were ready he rose without a sound
While all of the rest were left standing around.
I fell to my knees, but it was too late;
I had waited too long and thus sealed my fate.
I stood and I cried as they rose out of sight;
Oh, if only I had been ready tonight.
In the words of this poem the meaning is clear;
The coming of Jesus is drawing near.
There's only one life and when comes the last call
We'll find that the Bible was true after all—Anonymous

Dear Heavenly Father, May the truth of your Word become real to me in my life. Help me to always be prepared for Your company and a new life on earth and in heaven. Company is coming -- and I can't wait!! In Jesus name. Amen.

Geneice Kemper

(This poem was in my hometown newspaper - *The Ledger*, Hemingford NE on December 22, 2005)

December 23

Company is Coming: Waiting and Preparing for New Life

[Mary] was soon going to have a baby, and while they were there, she gave birth to her first-born son. She dressed him in baby clothes and laid him on a bed of hay, because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2:7 CEV)

Today we know the best event in the history of the world came when God sent us his Son. The almost peculiar thing was he didn't come riding in on the finest stallion as the adult version of himself, but rather came as a helpless little baby in the arms of parents that didn't have the means to care for him in the splendor he deserved or even be able to find him a comfortable night's lodging. Instead he spent his first night in a cold, dirty place. Not what I would have pictured as a place for the Prince of Peace to spend his first night in our world, not for the Savior of God's people, who had been waiting on him for centuries.

But it suited His purpose perfectly! He was teaching and preparing us from the very beginning, setting an example for us. In other words, when we by faith view the Son of God being made man and laying in a cold, hard manger, we must be humbled, and our worldly ambitions and vain pettiness must be checked at the proverbial stable entryway, our own home and church doorways. We must best understand what Joseph and Mary went through that first Christmas, away from home and all alone. Only it was this baby, a very special baby, coming in no special way, which made them smile. No one knew what Joseph and Mary knew that night. But they were no longer waiting for God's presence, they were basking in the glory of it. They were less alone than ever before and would be forever more.

Dear Father, The air and ground were cold that long-ago night, when a very special little baby was born, just as it will be this winter. But in the quiet moment of this season, I will be prepared for it, for I know you will be right here with me. I will know, like that first night of the baby's arrival in this world, that His steady sleeping breath foretold the peace I have through Him, your Son, Jesus Christ, my Lord and Savior. I am proud to say, Amen!

Donald Otey



December 24 -- Christmas Eve

Company is Coming: Welcoming the Guest

I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people; to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. (Luke 2:10b, NRSV)

Jesus said to them, "And remember I am with you always, to the end of the ages". (Matthew 28:20b)

Our theme for Christmas Eve and Day is "Welcoming the Guest." As I thought about this theme an old radio commercial popped into my head. Since 1986 Thomas Edward Bodett has been the spokesman for Motel 6, ending commercials with, "I'm Tom Bodett for Motel 6, and we'll leave the light on for you." Advent is a time for preparation. We prepare our homes and our hearts for Christmas.

When my family was young, I would spend every December day leading up to Christmas cleaning, decorating, baking, cooking, and shopping — preparing my home for guests. Our family tradition was to attend Candlelight Service at church and then bring all of our friends home with us for a Christmas Eve party. I wanted our guests to feel welcome and honored.

My home was totally prepared, but my heart--not so much. I wish I would have spent much more time preparing my heart to welcome the most honored guest of all, our Lord Jesus Christ, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. As I have grown older, and I hope wiser, I have come to understand that celebrating the true meaning of Christmas is not just remembering what God did for us on that first Christmas Day, but recognizing what God is doing for us now and preparing to do for us in the future. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. Hopefully we can all say, "Welcome Lord Jesus! We are prepared, and we'll leave the light on for you."

Holy God, thank you for the greatest Christmas gift ever! Help us prepare to welcome and worship our Lord Jesus Christ in our homes and hearts each and every day. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Ruth Ann Campagna





O Holy Night

December 25 -- Christmas Day

Company is Coming: Welcoming the Guest

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in a pitch-dark land, light has dawned. (Isaiah 9:2)

The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people. (Titus 2:11)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1-6, 14)

Christmas 1996 was the most different Christmas my family had celebrated (until 2020). That summer Aubrie, David, and I flew to Honolulu to join Steve at his new duty station—Pearl Harbor. We spent the summer unpacking and exploring. Everything was new and exciting. In the fall we turned our focus to getting the kids adjusted to their new school and active in a Girl Scout troop and Cub Scout pack. But as the year went on, it never did feel like fall or winter to us. Coming from Virginia Beach and northern Indiana, we were used to the changing colors of fall and colder winter days. We no longer needed our flannel pajamas and winter coats; and it felt very strange to be out Christmas shopping in shorts, tank tops, and sandals. Even the decorations were different! Instead of fir or pine trees decorated with lights, there were decorated palm trees; and Santa didn't wear a heavy red suit in Hawaii, he wore a red and green aloha shirt and shorts. We frequently commented to one another that it just didn't feel like Christmas.

Isn't that the way it is with many of us? When things change, when our traditions have to be altered, when our expectations are not met (especially around holidays), it doesn't feel like the holiday is really here. This year our celebrations may have had to be altered. Some of us have not been able to gather with family and friends the way we have in the past. And we certainly missed being in the church for the weeks of Advent and Christmas Eve. But just like every other year since Christians began celebrating Christmas, today we join Christians around the world to celebrate the birth of Christ and to welcome this holy guest, who has been born anew, into our lives.

In the midst of change, fear, divisions, and anxiety—in the midst of darkness, light has come; and darkness cannot overcome it! And this holy, loving, merciful, light shining guest has brought a gift for you, a gift for me, a gift for all people—salvation.

Spend and enjoy some time with this guest on this blessed Christmas Day!

Father God, As we welcome this most anticipated guest of Christmas, fill our hearts with love, hope, peace, and joy that may be shared with those around us, near and far. Amen.

Pastor Faith



*merry
christmas*

December 26

Enjoying the Company



Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. (Romans 15:7)

We'd recently moved to a large neighborhood in Grayson, Georgia. As we were starting to get to know people we were invited to a Christmas party at the neighbors we'd just met. We were looking forward to meeting new people and celebrating, so we found a babysitter, baked something to take, dressed up and walked over to their house. When we arrived there were only a couple of cars but we figured maybe other folks walked like we did or maybe we were first. It's awkward to be first sometimes and we really didn't know many of the neighbors yet. We wondered if we should wait and come back in a bit. But no, somebody's got to be among the first so we knocked and waited.

The door opens to different neighbors. Not the ones who had invited us. Not people we'd ever met. These people, who we've never seen before, are having a small holiday gathering of family friends. Awkward.

We explained we had the wrong house! They explained we not only had the wrong house but the wrong day. The party we were invited to is two doors down on the next night. Really awkward.

But it was also really funny. These neighbors, who we'd never met, also saw the humor and were welcoming and gracious and were on board with spontaneous extra surprise guests who they had never met. We were brought into their home and their circle of friends and had a great time. It was an evening of much laughing and eating and getting to know more new people.

We got to live a real life God moment. Because isn't God welcoming, gracious, and excited to bring new people into the party no matter how they arrived?

For me, Heaven is laughter, sharing good food, and loving community. It's a state of being where we feel included and embraced, and all awkwardness is brushed away.

This really happened. And we still got to go to a party the next night!

Dear Father, For the company of new friends and old, we give you thanks. Amen.

Ruthann Litchford

December 27

Enjoying the Company

Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out “Abba, Father”. (Galatians 4:6)

Last year’s Christmas was a milestone Christmas for our family. There was, of course, the inevitable direction of continued growth that tends to happen in families which was of its own value. I believe the number of those under the age of 20 clearly outnumbered those above. Most importantly, in the context of the telling of this story however, was my older brother, Michael, my older sister, Stacey and my younger sister, Sarah. All of us have spent years in the past avoiding one another, being angry at one another, refusing to speak. About four or five years ago, this ended, although slowly and tentatively. We gradually began showing up more often at one other’s homes and holidays, and this marked the second time in 10 years when we all had shown up at the same event. It was, however, the first Christmas.

Adding them and theirs to our already large Christmas parties pushed our attendance, as best as memory recalls, somewhere in the 30s. This Christmas, without question, was the most significant one in memory. I had my siblings, my parents, friends, cousins and plenty of extras that came along with them. I realize now that it was the last Christmas party I was to have in that house although I was not aware at the time.

I remember walking through the house, enjoying the company of others. I remember more than that, watching the faces, watching them enjoy this moment, this day. Watching them enjoy the entire family, together. I remember a moment, joking with my siblings, yelling over the noise and laughter, as my brother and younger sister made fun of one another, while my older sister rolled her eyes and shook her head. I noticed my Mom watching us all, watching her children on Christmas, laughing and reveling with one another. This was a moment I knew she had been waiting on for a very long time. So had I.

There are few joys greater than the company of those with a place deep in our heart-- to then amplify this through reunion, gifts, great food and the celebration of Jesus is sometimes beyond words. In these moments the only thing left for us to do is to give thanks to God.

Heavenly Father, thank you. Thank you for our intense joy, our intense love for one another. The more we follow, the more we reside with You. The more we reside with You, the greater our joys, blessings and receive love. Heavenly Father, thank you.

Matt Gibson

December 28

Enjoying the Company

To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. (Luke 2:11 NRSV)

What is the meaning of Christmas? It is so easy to get distracted by many voices, but this word from the angel sums it all up for me. Christmas is when God enters into the realm of human life in a way that has never happened before or since. God takes on human flesh. The Lord is born! And nothing has been the same ever since.

There is a phrase in the carol “Silent Night, Holy Night,” that captures the essence of Christmas for me. Describing what is happening at the birth of Jesus, it says, “the dawn of redeeming grace.” Christmas is the dawn of God’s redeeming grace.

In the Apostles’ Creed, we can see a three-fold grace associated with the triune God. God the Father is revealed first through creating grace. God the Son is revealed first through redeeming grace. God the Holy Spirit is revealed first through sanctifying grace. The three are distinct, yet inseparable.

At Christmas, God gives the world the gift of redeeming grace, grace that heals us from brokenness, saves us from sinfulness, restores us for goodness and mercy. Heaven comes to earth to fill the earth with saving love, redeeming grace. In the life of Jesus, we see this gift being unwrapped, step by step, word by word, deed by deed, until at last, in the words of another hymn, “Love’s redeeming work is done” (from “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today”). The work of redeeming grace is not only born but is completed through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Into a world that is rife with division, plagued by pandemic, adrift with despair, infected with racial and economic hierarchy, threatened with environmental calamity, into this troubled world we receive the gift of Jesus, who has come to save us from all that would destroy us. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the redeeming grace of Jesus has filled my soul and many of yours as well. We know that this love is the key to life, the cure for our ills, the hope of the world. Once again this year, we rejoice in wondrous love and joy to receive the gift of Jesus. With all that we have lived through in this year of 2020, we have faith and take courage knowing that the dawn of redeeming grace has risen, and nothing can stop the Light of Christ from shining. Of that, I am more confident than ever because I have seen that Light shine forth in the people of the church through the many challenges and changes we have faced together, all because Christ the Savior is born. That is what it is all about!

Lord Jesus, You come into the world the strength of redeeming grace, to free us from sin and to fill us with Your love. Prepare us to receive Your birth afresh and anew. Open the eyes of our hearts to behold the signs of Your glory shining all around us, for You live and reign with the Father and the Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.

Jeff Mickle, Alexandria District Superintendent

December 29

Enjoying the Company



*God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them.
(Hebrews 6:10)*

As I think about this past year and all that has happened and is still happening, I realize just how fortunate I am and what a great life I have had. I am in my third marriage and happier and more content than I have ever been. I had a wonderful job with Fairfax County Public Schools, though I didn't always think so, but today I have the best retirement a person could have. I have been retired for 27 years and have had a great life.

I have been a volunteer since I was 18. Starting with the Jefferson Volunteer Fire Department and the Vienna Volunteer Fire Department, I joined the Warrenton Lions Club, later moving to the Fauquier Lions Club and now I'm a member of the Mason Neck Lions Club. Having just passed my 40th year as a Lion, volunteer work is nothing new to me.

But it's amazing the people you talk to who have never done volunteer work of any kind to help anyone. I just can't understand that they seem to feel if they don't get paid, they don't do it. I have always loved volunteer work because you are always helping someone in some way, and it makes you feel better about life. In the last 27 years that I have been retired, I have done so many different things from teaching ceramics to senior citizens at assisted living homes to supporting local senior citizens here in Fauquier County. I have worked with the Lions' sight and hearing vans giving hearing exams, eye exams, and glaucoma exams for children and senior citizens. The Lions also pay for eyeglasses and hearing aids when the patient can not pay for them. The Lions just keep giving and giving when it comes to helping people.

I feel like I have done so much for so long, and now I can do nothing. It's so frustrating, but there is nothing I can do about it but look back and see what I've done and be thankful that I was able to do it and that I enjoyed it. I look for ways to keep going behind the scenes. The one plus is that I love to sing and at the ripe old age of 70 I started to sing solos at churches. At 80 I started singing with a friend who has three local bands, singing bluegrass, jazz, and blues. It's so much fun learning something new and different at such an old age but also very scary. Who knows what's next? I can't imagine!

So I say to all of you, take a good look at your life and be thankful for what you have accomplished and look for ways to keep going and do what you can for others. Especially remember the ones who have gone on before us who didn't have the chance that we still have to make changes and help others. Don't forget, God loves you no matter what you can do.

Lord, help us to understand how fortunate we are to be able to serve others. Keep us strong and keep us moving. Amen.

Barbara Collyer

December 30

Enjoying the Company

Think how much the Father loves us. He loves us so much that he lets us be called his children, as we truly are. But since the people of this world did not know who Christ is, they don't know who we are. My dear friends, we are already God's children, though what we will be hasn't yet been seen. But we do know that when Christ returns, we will be like him, because we will see him as he truly is. This hope makes us keep ourselves holy, just as Christ is holy. (1 John 3:1-3 CEV)

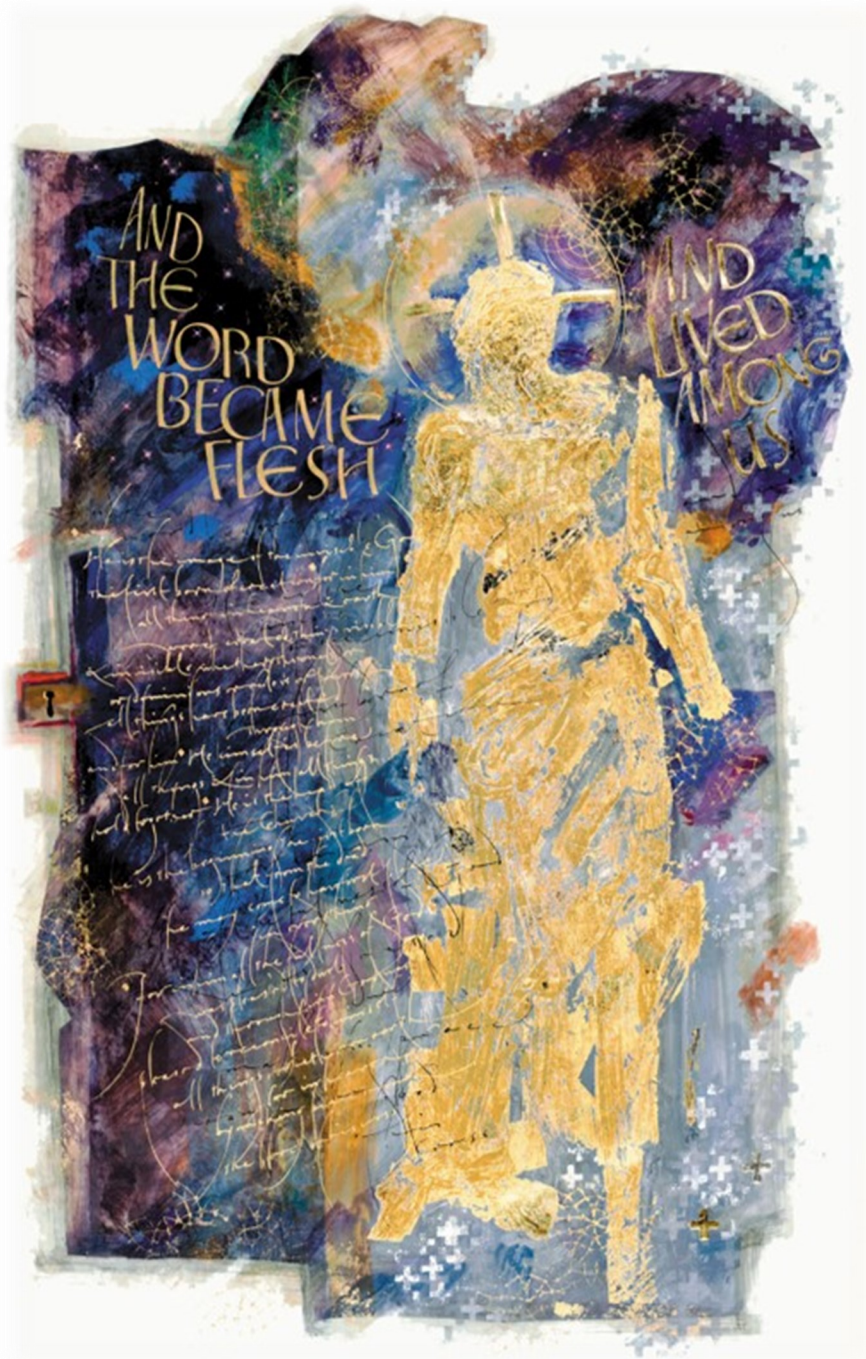
It is by the gift of God's grace that I know I am a child of God. I am born of God the Creator. I am God's child by His Grace. I am saved by the grace of God, with Love that originated in God himself.

Wow! Aren't those amazing thoughts? It is a sincere privilege to be called a child of God. Okay, no I don't go around all day reciting these great words to myself. I don't have to. I know it because John told me so in this passage, "My dear friends, we are already God's children, though what we will be hasn't yet been seen." I know I'm recognized for what I am, a person of God. I don't preach, but I do act in compassion and in a caring way talk to the people I work with or otherwise meet during the day. I'm blessed just knowing many of those people are fellow Christians and understand it all, but others are not and still listen and still feel the compassion that God gives me to pass on to them. As small of a piece of someone's life my time with them may involve, even if only a simple friendly smile, I do pray it has some significance in helping them come to a realization that here and now they can see what we see. And more people can be ready with eyes open for the return of our Savior. We are ALL children of God!

A 2020 Footnote...I wrote this original devotion and prayer a few years ago, at a time when I could still talk to many people face to face on a daily basis to share my passion, and before the masks, when I could share something as simple as a "friendly smile." This year has been a challenge, a real seemingly insurmountable challenge! But I'll tell you a secret: I've not stopped feeling the total blessing of what John talks about here: Christ will return, and as a Christian I plan to be like Him, and I will see Him as he truly is ... but there's more. I plan to help others see Him for who He truly is. Others can come to know Him through us. So, while still in these challenging times we should make plans to receive Him anew this Advent, not only into our very own hearts, but in preparation for when we can be with others face to face again to share His story and so they'll come to know Him through our reenergized Love! (By the way, I added a "Hallelujah!" to the end of the prayer this year to emphasize that reenergizing intent...Can I get a holy "Hallelujah?")

Dear Father, I feel your great love lavished on me, each and every day. And I am humbled to be called a child of God. Please, let me do my part to help those who do not recognize who they really are to come to you through your Son, learning that your Love is eternal and just what that brings to our eternal lives. Hallelujah and Amen!

Donald Otey



Artwork from *The Saint John's Bible*

December 31 -- New Year's Eve

Enjoying the Company

I will have much joy in the Lord. My soul will have joy in my God, for He has clothed me with the clothes of His saving power. He has put around me a coat of what is right and good, as a man at his own wedding wears something special on his head, and as a bride makes herself beautiful with stones of great worth. (Isaiah 61:10 NLV)

Katie M. Reid, author of *Made Like Martha*, states (in explaining how she first led her life as a new Christian): “It’s like I was frantically picking up clutter before company arrives. Trying to make myself presentable through a dizzying display of tidying up. And then suddenly I came to - the brain fog cleared as I turned around to see the reality I had overlooked. Right there in my living room, with the orange shag carpet, was Jesus. There He sat, in a recliner, as if He lived there. And then I remembered, He did live there! His residency was the home of my heart. I had invited Jesus in, years ago, but in my misguided theology, that I needed to earn (and keep) Him happy through works, I had buried this important truth: Jesus wasn’t company I needed to impress; He was family to enjoy.”

Let me repeat that: **Jesus isn’t company I need to impress; He is family to enjoy.**

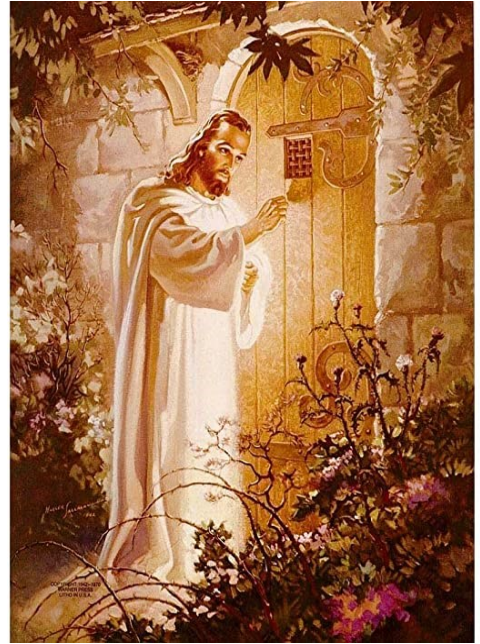
As a child, how I loved to hear the words “Company’s Coming!” and I still do now. When I was a little girl, it meant my grandparents were going to visit. My brother, sisters and I had to help clean up the house and put on clean clothes. But it was worth it, to have Grandma and Grandpa visit! It was wonderful having them pay attention to me and hearing them tell me stories and accepting me without judgment! I loved sitting on their laps, and they sometimes even brought me a present. Not surprisingly, today, my favorite company happens to be my grandchildren.

However, we all know 2020 has been a “company-less” year. Because of COVID, we started living a life that involved specific guidelines designed for our safety and the safety and health of others. We were told to stay home, so we started staying home. We did not go visit family or have family visit us. We could no longer go to the church building to worship. We began wearing masks every time we were in a public place, and stayed six feet away from others. Weeks of this new way of living turned into months, and months turned into seasons. By the middle of summer our changes in routine started to feel almost normal. With this new normal, the adjustment I’ve disliked the most was not being able to have company, which meant I couldn’t see my children and my grandchildren. I’ve missed out on precious grandchildren hugs. I’ve missed out on having little Virginia sit on my lap, reading to her, as well as baking, telling jokes, and “hanging out” with the older grandchildren. It’s been tough.

Is 2021 going to be a year when we can have company again, and BE company again? We don’t know yet. One thing I DO know, is that even though I’ve not been able to visit my grandchildren for almost a year, I’ve still had “company.” The weeks of Advent leading us up to Christmas were in preparation for the Ultimate Company: Jesus Christ. He is always knocking at the door to our homes and our hearts – we just have to invite Him in. You remember the image of Jesus knocking on the door that we have seen since our childhood Sunday School days? That picture pops into my mind.

He is always knocking. It's up to us to open the door into our lives and welcome Him in to be our company. I am grateful that our Lord is there with me **every single day**.

What's so special about Jesus being our company? With Him, we have someone who listens to us, someone who loves us, someone who heals us, someone who comforts us, someone who understands all our feelings, someone who forgives us, someone who protects us, and someone who saves us. WOW! That's the best company ever! But we must make time to BE with Him and enjoy His company. It's kind of like when Grandma and Grandpa came to visit. We didn't just leave them alone in the living room and ignore them while they sat on the couch! We talked with them, shared our feelings with them, laughed with them, i.e., spent quality time with them. We interacted with them. So it is with Jesus. Relationships are a two way street – both parties need to participate and engage. Our Lord wants to be in our lives. Jesus is there for us all the time, it is important for us to also be there and make the time to praise and worship Him.



I try to set aside a time each morning for prayer, a devotional reading or two, and meditation. Some days are more difficult than others to appropriate the time. My bad habits of laziness, procrastination, and poorly placed priorities sometimes prevent me from enjoying my morning visit with Jesus. As I move through my day, opportunities present themselves for more little visits with Jesus. When the weather allows it, I often sit on our back screened porch to read or quilt, or spend time working in the yard. As birds come to the bird feeders on the porch or a squirrel dashes by me while I am pulling weeds, I stop and praise Jesus for those wonders of nature. When a beautiful cloud formation appears in an amazingly blue sky, I take the time to thank Him for that as well. When the brilliant colors of autumn were displayed on the trees this past fall, it was another time I would have a “mini visit” with Jesus.

I have an alarm on my FitBit which is set to go off every day at 3:16 pm. I stop whatever I'm doing when it goes off and take a moment to thank God for my life, and all the blessings that have been bestowed on my family and me. I thank Him for the best gift of all – His son – our Lord Jesus Christ. God loves us so much that He sent His son to save us and enable us to be with Him in heaven eternally. We are to enjoy Him as we would a close friend.

Enjoy spending time with Him. Make 2021 a year in which you open the door and let Jesus in. And if you have already let him in, make your visits even better. We have **no greater friend**.

Father God, Thank you for the gift of your precious son Jesus. Please help me to remember that He is always there, knocking on my heart, and that it is up to me to let Him in and spend time with Him. Give me the strength to do this every day of my life. I love you, Lord. Amen.

Gayle Ferrell

January 1 -- New Year's Day

Enjoying the Company

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us. (Hebrews 12:1)

Running has been an important part of my life because it combines things I love. First, I like running. The exercise sometimes helps me focus and other times it helps me forget. As my body works, I can clear my mind to make a decision or to put aside worries. It's a time when I can visit with God.

I also love being part of nature. Running takes me out in God's beautiful creation. One of the most memorable experiences is a marathon I ran through the giant redwood trees in Eureka, CA in the spring of 2012. Some of the redwoods date back to when Christ was born. There was a moment I was all alone with six feet of mist up to my neck swirling around as I passed through it. I was struck by the magnificence of our world and how this place makes me feel so close to God and his beautiful creation.

Then there is the community of runners. Some of us are competitive, constantly trying for a PR (personal record). Others want to improve their health, just get some exercise. Some like fast miles, others ultra long endurance races. Being part of a community feeds my soul and keeps me excited about new roads and trails. We celebrate, encourage, and console each other.

I see many parallels between running these earthly races and the race described in the Hebrews scripture. Christians live in community also; we are in this together. Both require perseverance, strength, and courage. Through meditation and worship, we can discern our path. And the setting is God's creation, the world of nature filled with beautiful and diverse people whom we are called to love.

When I am out on a running adventure, I find joy inside that is hard to explain. These experiences stay with me in my heart and mind, and I revisit those memories from time to time. There are certain to be challenges in 2021. May we face these as a community with God as our guide to run "with endurance the race that is set before us." Happy New Year!

Dear Father, As your Word says, renew our strength; give us wings like eagles so we can run and not be weary. Guide us through this new year as we serve our community and you. Amen. (From Isaiah 40:31)

Duane Williamson

*God gave us eyes
to see the beauty in nature,
and hearts to see the beauty
in each other.*



January 2

Enjoying the Company

*And now **these three remain: faith, hope and love.**
But **the greatest of these is love.** (1 Corinthians 13:13)*

It's not how many summertimes we had to give to fall, the early morning smiles we tearfully recall. What matters most is that we loved at all. From "What Matters Most" by Kenny Rankin

On my way to church the other day, I turned on the car radio. I thought I had left it set on the Christmas Channel. Turns out it was set on the next station up, the Sirius XM chain, which is the Sinatra Channel. Yes, I enjoy some Sinatra and no, I do not consider myself old. Jack Jones was singing, *"What matters most is that we loved at all" from a song with the same title. I'd never heard it, but it started me thinking.*

Of course my mind went to my own life and those I've loved and lost. Losing Marty was a huge loss. The pain of his death still runs very deep, and creeps into my life when I least expect it. The loss is very deep, because the love is very deep. That deep love is of God. My life would certainly have been very different had I not known the love that Marty and I shared. It informed my life when we were together and it does even now that we are apart; and I know I am a far better person for having loved him. I know many of you can relate.

2020 has been a very tough year. We learned new phrases. We changed our thinking. Old habits "left the building." Social-distancing, flatten the curve, slow the spread, wash your hands to happy birthday! Drive-thru communion. Curbside conversations. Worship services without bulletins?! People are hurting everywhere: finances, loneliness, illness, grief and loss, isolation, depression, anxiety, Zoom or not to Zoom, mask or not to mask. The list goes on. Some would ask, where is God in all this? As the Prophet Habakkuk wrote, "O Lord, how long ...?"

We don't know how long these COVID 19 days will last, but God has been active, engaged, and evident in these dark times. Now, more than ever, people are stepping up to pitch in and help. We are finding new ways to do things and solve problems. We are doing what we can to stay connected. We are demonstrating God's agape love. The love that calls us to join the body of Christ to create the kingdom of heaven here on earth, as we selflessly serve and connect with others. It's the love that inspires some to create fabric artwork that brings peace and comfort to others; or draws people to God. It's the love that inspires others to help

with honey-do lists. It's the love that inspires us to prepare food for someone. It's the love that nudges us to join mission work teams. It's the love that inspires us to sit with the hurting ... just because. It's the love that inspires us to tend a garden or a broken heart. It's the kind of love that makes us God's hands and feet. It flows through us to others.

The New Year is the perfect time to look back at the opportunities we had to "live our faith and share God's love." Did we do what we could in this pandemic year? Did we listen to the nudges, the inspirations, and do our part? Did we find ways to be kind and cooperative as new "guidelines" were given to us from those in authority? Just as the New Year is a time to look back, it is also a time to look forward: to look for ways to serve, to look for inspiration, to listen to God's nudging, to invite and encourage others to help us make a difference in the world. It's 2021 and my plan is to try to make a difference in someone's life every week, because what matters most is that we love. Will you join me?

O God, thank you for the gift of love that inspires, nudges and sustains us. Help us to listen for your call to step up and love, even though it may be inconvenient, awkward, or unpopular. Let us see you in each other as we reach out in community as the body of Christ, wherever that may be. Amen.

Patricia Martin



January 3

Enjoying the Company

But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir. (Galatians 4:4-7)

As we celebrate Advent, we reflect about what the season means to us. In Latin, the word Advent means coming. We celebrate the coming of Jesus into the world. Think about how this changed our world forever. As we celebrate the four seasons of Advent -- Hope, Peace, Love, and Joy -- we should enjoy the company of Jesus and each other. It is about hope that we have every day because of what Jesus Christ did for us. As we enjoy the company of our family and friends, we should include Jesus in the special circle of company we enjoy. Christmas should not be just a day in our lives—it is a way of living in our community and sharing the hope, peace, love, and joy with others as we enjoy their company. This would help us remember that Jesus Christ should be the center of our lives and Jesus is love.

During Advent we are in good company. God's people are represented by the candle of Hope. The Old Testament prophets are represented by the candle of Peace. John the Baptist is represented by the candle of Love. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is represented by the candle of Joy. Enjoy the company of these sacred people in our lives.

As we thank our friends for sharing a wonderful and joyful celebration of Jesus' birthday with us—let us include Jesus and his Father, our God. Thank them for all the many ways the two of them have blessed us. Thank them for being in our lives and sharing their love with us every day. Enjoy their company in our lives.

Can you think of people whose company you enjoy? These would be people that bring joy to your heart. You probably can think of a number of things that you want to share with them. I read an article by Mike Jantzen where he shared that just as we want to share the company of these special people, God enjoys our company. He really wants to share many things with us and to know what is in our hearts. Jantzen continues to explain that as Christians, we should want to have a close relationship with the most amazing person in the world. Just as our other friends, God wants us to understand him more each day. He wants us to understand how he thinks, what he loves, as well as what he doesn't like. The more time we spend with him, the more we learn about him; his love will begin to grow in us every day. We will learn how to be a good friend like he is—putting the needs of others first and forgiving people even when they may hurt us.



At this time of year we appreciate how important it is to spend time with family. God and Jesus should be included as our family. They bring us together and help us get through the trials we have in our daily lives. Our world and lives are better because they are part of our lives.

As David Cameron quoted, “Christmas gives us an opportunity to pause and reflect on the important things around us.” Our community and the people we enjoy spending time with are definitely important things in our lives. Use this time of year to think about opening your heart to appreciate the company around you and in your heart. Enjoy these special people as often as you can.

My Grandmother Lena (Gray) had a journal in which she wrote down special quotes. One of the quotes was written by Bob Hope. He said, “When we recall Christmas past, we usually find that the simplest things—not the great occasions—give off the greatest glow of happiness. My idea of Christmas, whether old-fashioned or modern is very simple: loving others.”

Enjoy the company—special people are precious in our lives. They are with us physically and spiritually. We are family!

Dear God, Please help us appreciate and enjoy the company of you and Jesus in our lives. Let us see how our lives can be better with you both guiding us to be better people and sharing your love with others. Help us to enjoy the company around us that we can share together every day. You are a precious gift to us and you shared your precious gift with us. Amen.

Mary Beth Colvin

(Quoted information for this article is cited to Mike Jantzen, David Cameron, and Bob Hope)

January 4

Enjoying the Company

Let me hear of your loving kindness in the morning, for I put my trust in you; show me the road that I must walk for I lift up my soul to you. (Psalm 143: 1,4-8)

Today is the first day of my retirement! After 30+ years as an educator and 20+ as a student, school with its rhythms and structure has always been a defining part of my life. I have worked and learned with amazing mentors, colleagues, and outstanding students who have taught me more than I ever could return. I am thankful for their friendships and the memories I have. It is with mixed emotions that I start this new year and new season of life.

I plan to spend as much time as possible with my grandson, Scotty, and with his little brother who is to arrive in February. The years pass quickly, and I want to take advantage of this time when the children enjoy spending days with their Granny. I have a new sewing studio with a fantastic new machine that I can't wait to break in. And I look forward to traveling with Duane--though he has to support me for a few more years before we can hit the road:) And definitely more beach time!

But as I reflect on these much anticipated plans, I wonder if I have done enough yet. Have I done enough for God, God's people, and God's kingdom? I frequently pass a sign in the yard of a handsome home on a major road not far from our church. It says "Dun-E-Nuf" with the family name below. Perhaps you've seen it? I don't like it much actually. Being older certainly shouldn't mean you are done contributing. Much of the work in our church and in our local, national, and world community is done by those who are older and may struggle with serious health complications. Saints like Jane, who sends cheerful cards, and Delores, who calls on birthdays and anniversaries, continue to love God's people through their own difficulties. The well being of our neighbors and the continuance of the kingdom of God is the responsibility of the young and old, the strong and weak alike.

This is a day of new beginnings,
time to remember, and move on,
time to believe what love is bringing,
laying to rest the pain that's gone.

For by the life and death of Jesus,
love's mighty Spirit, now as then,
can make for us a world of difference
as faith and hope are born again.

Then let us, with the Spirit's daring,
step from the past, and leave behind
our disappointment, guilt and grieving,
seeking new paths, and sure to find.

In faith we'll gather round the table
to show and share what love can do.
This is a day of new beginnings;
our God is making all things new.

Brian Wren, 1978



Heavenly Father, Today is the first day of the rest of our lives. I pray for the discernment to know what you are calling us to do next and for the willingness to follow your call. Never let us excuse inaction by saying we've "Dun-E-Nuf." I pray that you will guide our church and our nation this new year, as we set priorities and commit our time, talents, and resources to your kingdom. In Jesus' name, Amen

Rosanne Williamson

January 5

Enjoying the Company

For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the sovereign Lord will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations. (Isaiah 61:11)

At this time of year, we've just finished enjoying so much fun, excitement, and family time that comes with the holidays. We can't help but yearn for the joy we just shared with so many loved ones. And some of us may sense a feeling of being deflated as we come down off the "high of the holiday season."

But the verse above reminds us to remain excited following the Christmas season and to continually share and look forward to the righteousness and joy of Christ. And although Christmas day has since passed, the joy we share of welcoming our Savior, Jesus Christ, should be with us each day as we begin a new year.

I pray that as you begin this new year, you continue your journey with Christ by sharing his love, spreading his word, and witnessing righteousness as it springs up throughout the new year. May grace and peace be with you.

Heavenly Father, May you fill our hearts, minds, and body with your love, grace, and strength such that we may deliver your message to those in need. Give us the strength and guidance to enjoy company with all those you place in our path. Amen.

Brett Hahne



January 6 Epiphany

Enjoying the Company

*Arise! Shine! Your light has come;
the Lord's glory has shone upon you.
Though darkness covers the earth and gloom the nations,
the Lord will shine upon you; God's glory will appear over you. (Isaiah 60:1-2)*

Epiphany – camels, Magi, a newborn baby boy, a bright star, fine gifts – a day to celebrate the coming of the wise men from the east to find and worship the newborn king. In Oxford dictionary terms, Epiphany is the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles as represented by the Magi (Matthew 2:1–12). I love that these men, who studied the skies, saw that star in the east and knew that God was doing a new thing and that they needed to travel to witness the newborn king. I love knowing that if we have our eyes open to happenings in the world, God breaks in, and I am often startled by the brightness of the light God shines.

Darkness can be a powerful force, and it can come from many places. Fear, anxiety, grief, illness, depression, addictions, hunger, abuse, war, broken relationships, inequality, can all bring about darkness in our world and in our lives. I have suffered from depression for many years and know how overwhelming that darkness can be. Through the years I have had several counselors and taken medication for my depression. But one year, when I was away from my family and studying at seminary, it was really bad. I reached out to some wonderful friends who also had a history with depression. One of them gave me some great advice. She told me to keep looking for a glimmer of light in the darkness. Sometimes that glimmer was so tiny that it was almost overcome by the darkness I was experiencing, but not completely. Glimmers of light came in phone calls, hot tea, smiles, and laughter after tears with these blessed women.

I kept focused on the light and it led me to want more light in my life again. I checked myself into a hospital, got my medication adjusted and worked again with a therapist. This wasn't the path I wanted to take, but I knew it was the right thing to do, and it helped tremendously. "Though darkness covers the earth and gloom the nations, the Lord will shine upon you." Through my amazing friends, the love of my family back at home, I know that "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." (John 1:5)

Like the star led the wise men to Jesus, the glimmers of light in the darkness of my depression led me to acknowledge more powerfully what God in Christ Jesus has been and is doing in my life.

*O star of wonder, star of light, star with royal beauty bright,
westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light.*

Lord, help us all to recognize the power of your light shining in our world and in our lives, and let us arise! and shine! for the Lord's glory has shone upon us. And then maybe we can offer glimpses of that light to others. Amen.

May you continue to shine!
Pastor Faith Weedling



Shine Bethel Shine

**Thanks to all who contributed to
Bethel's Advent Devotional. May God
bless our church and your family in this
new year as we are "Living our faith,
and sharing God's love."**

Happy New Year!