

December 2, 2018

Richard Jones

Anticipation! Oh, we so look forward to Christmas! When I was a child, I remember decorating the Christmas tree on Christmas Eve, putting the gifts we had bought and wrapped under the tree, and going to the eleven o'clock Christmas Eve church service. When we would get home, mom would give us a quick snack and then off to bed we would go. We would have trouble getting to sleep knowing that Santa would come and bring even more presents.

One year it got to me. About four in the morning, I woke up and very quietly got out of bed, quietly went down the stairs, and went into the living room where all was ready for Christmas morning. There were all the gifts! I could even see the big gifts that were not wrapped (my new sixteen-inch bicycle). I didn't touch anything or open any gifts, but I looked and looked. Finally, I very quietly went back upstairs to bed. But going back to sleep was nearly impossible. My new bike was there!

In the morning when we all got to go into the living room, everyone was excited, but me not so much. I had already seen all of the boxes and bows around the tree, and I already knew that the new bicycle next to the sofa was for me.

Somehow, snooping and knowing was not as much fun as waiting with anticipation for the event. That was the only year I went looking before Christmas.

We come to the beginning of the Advent season. We already know that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has come. We already know that He has come to save us from our sins. We already know that He comes to give us life eternal. We know, but the people 2000 years ago did not know. They just were anticipating a Messiah to save them from Rome. We know that He will come again, but when? Anticipation!!

Prayer: Dear Father. In this season of advent, let us remember the anticipation of Christmas from our youth, as we, with the entire world, again anticipate the return of your Son. We know He will come. Bless us all, as we also bless you. Amen.

December 3, 2018

Deborah Crowdy

1 Corinthians 1:3-9 -- Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way – with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge – God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. Therefore, you do not lack and spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

On November 22, 1963 (yes, the day JFK was assassinated) my family flew from the States on our way to Mashoko Mission in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). We were settled in a home which we shared with another missionary family. The mission was set deeply in the bush, in the midst of a tribal trust land. The nearest shops were 100 miles away over a road that resembled a creek bed. My father loved Christmas and, like our Father in heaven, did not want his children to lack anything. How could he provide a Christmas tree for us, since there are no Christmas trees there? I'm sure he wracked his brain. He set out into the bush and collected three thorn bushes. Using coarse twine, he combined them to form our tree. His hands were scratched and torn and made so beautiful to me because they represented his love. If asked, all three of his children will tell you that the thorny tree was the most beautiful one we have seen in the fifty-five years since!

Christ's own hands were torn and ripped by the nails they drove through them. How precious this gift should be for us. Let us meditate this day on the beauty of those loving hands – a sacrifice made through love for us. Amen

December 4, 2018

Stephen Bentley

Mark 13: 33-37 -- Be on watch, be alert, for you do not know when the time will come. It will be like a man who goes away from home on a trip and leaves his servants in charge, after giving to each one his own work to do and after telling the doorkeeper to keep watch. Watch, then, because you do not know when the master of the house is coming—it might be in the evening or at midnight or before dawn or at sunrise. If he comes suddenly, he must not find you asleep. What I say to you, then, I say to all: Watch!"

Advent is a different season in that it has one foot in the past, as we prepare to remember Christ's birth, and one foot in the future as we await Christ's Coming at the end of history. In our scripture this morning, Jesus reminds us that it is also in the present. For those awaiting the coming of the Christ, we must always be alert.

I remember as a young kid and then even as an older adult playing the game of Hide 'n Seek with friends and youth groups. It was fun to hide in a really good spot. All my senses were on high alert. I could hear those seeking me getting closer. I would breath through my mouth, so they could not hear me breathing. Sometimes I could see their shoe or their foot just on the other side of a curtain or door. My senses where wide awake.

Jesus reminds us that the Christian life is one that is lived best when our senses are on full alert. We are looking for Christ's presence. How will God reveal God's self? We look to see how God's presence is made manifest in our daily living; at the office, in our home, at the school, in our car, etc. God is there. Can we see God? And maybe

another question Jesus would have us ask is, “How is God’s presence being revealed in me?”

Prayer: God of the past, the future, and our very present, make us alert at all times to see your presence and look for opportunities to BE your presence. Amen

December 5, 2018

Andrea Yaw

Luke 2:1-7 -- At that time Emperor Augustus ordered a census to be taken throughout the Roman Empire. When this first census took place, Quirinius was the governor of Syria. Everyone, then, went to register himself, each to his own hometown. Joseph went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to the town of Bethlehem in Judea, the birthplace of King David. Joseph went there because he was a descendant of David. He went to register with Mary, who was promised in marriage to him. She was pregnant, and while they were in Bethlehem, the time came for her to have her baby. She gave birth to her first son, wrapped him in cloths and laid him in a manger—there was no room for them to stay in the inn.

One of the very special parts of our Advent and Christmas preparation is the music. Our family loves music and especially Christmas music. Usually about Nov. 1 the Christmas CD’s come out—and even some cassette tapes of old favorites. It seems too early for some people but listening to this beautiful music for two months out of 12 does not seem excessive to us.

Many beautiful songs celebrate Jesus and in recent years one has touched my heart that I would like to share today:

My heart is Bethlehem – John Berry

Eternity stepped into time

And drew a mortal breath
Mystery so clearly seen
The world could not forget
That in the town of Bethlehem
In the most unlikely place
God, the Father wore a child's face.

There's something in the heart of God
So purely meek and mild
That finds its best expression in
The longings of a child.
For every child's heart in hungry
To be found and loved and known
A someone who would make their heart a home.

I wish for you this Christmas Eve
That you would find true peace
That silent nights are holy nights
And wonders never cease
There's no remembering
The ghost of Christmas past
For God's forgiveness finds your heart at last.

My heart is Bethlehem
I will make room for Him
This humble dwelling place
Made worthy by his grace.
This child is still adored
Because he still is born
Deep in the hearts of men
To love and not condemn
My heart is Bethlehem.

Today, ponder the miracle of God's greatest gift and the wonder of Jesus' humble birth.

To listen to this song, go to: <https://youtu.be/JgASSUFTzFs>

December 6, 2018

Christa Ciotola

1 Corinthians 13:7 -- Love never gives up; and its faith, hope, and patience never fail.

Have you ever been captivated by love? It can happen to anyone with unexpected things, people, or times. The definition of "captivate" is: to attract and hold by charm, beauty, or excellence (American Heritage Dictionary). Not all things or people that captivate our attention are good for us, but others are very beneficial. The Bible instructs us to "Guard you heart, for it is the wellspring of life" (Proverbs 4:23) and to "Love the lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength" (Deuteronomy 6:5, also quoted by Christ as the Greatest Commandment in Matthew 22: 37-38)

My upbringing included extended family. I have always been encouraged to love, particularly by my grandmother, whom I grew up calling "mommy," which evolved into "Mother" as I became an adult. She never tried to correct me, nor did my actual mother, and I believe it was because the love that existed there commanded a certain respect. It didn't need a proper name. It simply was.

But human love, even in its purest form, cannot match the love God has for us. Many relationships come and go, and many times lines are drawn and divisions are made when it comes to love. These are the warning signs of conditional love – that is, love that needs a name, a definition, or a nice little category to fit into. Related by

blood or not! But the rare, sweet, and beautiful love that is unconditional – it simply is.

It doesn't need a reason or have an agenda – it is simply love that exists for the sake of loving and for nothing more. Why did Christ come and jump through all the hoops of being an actual limited human being? For the sake of love – PURE love. Christmas is a great time to be captivated by His love and allow it to reflect in how we go about loving each other. How extended will your love be?

December 7, 2018

Julie Bentley

Census

Christmas is always a hectic time. In 1985 we discovered that we were expecting our third child due around December 7th-9th. How would we manage? Add to that we would be moving from Nineveh Indiana to Forest Park Ohio (close to Cincinnati) right before Thanksgiving. The movers boxed us up on Monday (November 25th), Tuesday (November 26th) the moving truck was loaded, Wednesday (November 27th) we moved in and it was Steve's birthday, Thursday was Thanksgiving, Sunday we went to our new Church, our boxes were 75% emptied and put away, and Andy was born Monday, December 2nd.

As I looked upon that tiny child in my arms the Advent season held a new meaning. I held that tiny baby and felt God's presence. I had such awe, amazement and wonder! We are preparing for the CHRIST CHILD to come in the form of a tiny baby. God provided a baby in a manger who was born during a time when there was a census – people being enrolled. Mary and Joseph traveled as we had done.

Luke 2:1-5: And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of

Syria. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem because he was of the house and lineage of David. To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

Prayer: Dear Emmanuel (God with us) As we go about the Advent season may we look for you to speak to us and reveal the Advent season in new ways. Amen

December 8, 2018

Julie Bentley

Shepherds

What do you think of when I say Christmas? Do you think of lights and the awe and wonder of the Christmas season? Or do you find yourself SO BUSY running here and there trying to find just the right gift for each person on your list? The first Christmas was a time of traveling for the census. People may have been connecting with family and friends. They were probably tired and perhaps even grumpy. There is a story that is even in play form which features Joram the shepherd who is a disagreeable man. Joram is a Grumpy Shepherd, until the night the archangel Gabriel appears to tell the shepherds to go into town to find a special baby, lying in a manger.

I encourage you to read the story of "The Grumpy Shepherd." Check it out at the library or on Amazon. Perhaps you will feel like Joram at times this Advent season. If so, it is OK. God promises to walk with us at all times.

Luke 2:8: And there were in the same country shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night.

Prayer: Dear Lord: Throughout the holy Advent season whether in awe and wonder or overwhelmed may we remember to give you glory and praise. Amen

December 9, 2018

Julie Bentley

Mary

This past year we sold my parents' home. My request was for the family pictures. Boy I received a LOT OF PICTURES. I wondered where to start. My maternal grandmother's name is Evelyn and we called her Nanny. She had an awesome book which contained her high school memories. The book was overflowing and disintegrating. I choose her book as the first one to tackle. For those of you who don't know, I love scrapbooking. I learned more about my Grandmother as I went along. She played basketball and was captain in her senior year... Throughout her book she had printed out and glued poems in place. They had a special meaning for her. I would like to share a poem with you this Advent season. It is not one that Evelyn had. It is actually more than a poem, it is also a song. The lyrics for "Mary Did you Know" were written by Mark Lowry, and the music by Buddy Greene. This song has been performed by several well-known singers. It may not be what we consider totally scriptural. On the other hand, perhaps you will find a "beautiful expression of God's love". So, as a tribute to Evelyn:

Mary did you know that your baby boy would one day walk on water?

Mary did you know that your baby boy would save our sons and daughters?

Did you know that your baby boy has come to make you new?

This child that you've delivered, will soon deliver you.

Mary did you know that your baby boy will give sight to a blind man?
Mary did you know that your baby boy will calm a storm with his
hand? Did you know that your baby boy has walked where angels
trod?

When you kiss your little baby, you kiss the face of God
Mary did you know? Mary did you know? Mary did you know?
Mary did you know? Mary did you know? Mary did you know?
The blind will see, the deaf will hear, the dead will live again
The lame will leap, the dumb will speak, the praises of the lamb
Mary did you know that your baby boy is Lord of all creation?
Mary did you know that your baby boy would one day rule the
nations?

Did you know that your baby boy is heaven's perfect lamb?
That sleeping child you're holding is the great I am
Mary did you know? Mary did you know? Mary did you know?
Mary did you know? Mary did you know? Mary did you know? Oh,
Mary did you know?

Luke 2:6-7: And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

Prayer: Dear Father: Thank you for the beautiful expressions of Your love. Amen

December 10, 2018

Julie Bentley

Gifts

A Bentley family tradition has grown in popularity over the years. Each person receives a box. They are all the same size. We go from youngest to oldest. The youngest opens his or her box. The next person perhaps shakes his/her box. What could it be? Each person

opens his/her box until everyone has opened their box. Most of us already know what it is. If we have guests, they receive a box as well. Can you guess what it is? The box is a “booklet” of lifesavers candies. Life preservers often remind us of swimming. These lifesavers represent “Jesus is our Life Saver”. This holiday season as you gather together remember this baby Jesus is a life saver. He is your life saver, and he is my life saver.

Luke 1:26-27: And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God, unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.

Prayer: Father God you come to us with this life changer – this life saver. Thank you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

December 11, 2018

Sharing

One of our family traditions is to turn on the Christmas tree and turn off all the other lights. It can be one person or two family members. One of our children would sit with me and we would watch our tree turn around (with a revolving tree stand). We could look at ornaments from different angles. We have a closer view of each ornament. Perhaps we bought it on vacation or received it as a gift. Perhaps it was a homemade ornament, or it has been passed down thru the generations. We can talk about the ornament(s) or just sit in wonder. I enjoy it and our children enjoy it. And now we have a new generation getting in on the action. Why is it so special? It is time together. Time to sit and be quiet, time to share, time to just be.

Matthew 1:19-20: Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her

away privately. But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife; for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.

Prayer: Father God, we come to you. We come to this time to sit and be quiet, to share, or to just be. Thank you for Your great love for us. Amen

December 12, 2018

Julie Bentley

Matthew 2:9-11: When they had heard the king, they departed: and lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold and frankincense, and myrrh.

I am the oldest of five children (3 girls and 2 boys). My parents were only children, and we enjoyed having both sets of Grandparents with us at various holidays, etc. My paternal Grandmother started a tradition with us girls when we were old enough to stay overnight (and the boys together when they were old enough). We would spend the night, ride the bus to downtown Dayton, visit Rikes with all of its beautiful decorations, each of us would pick 1 gift, eat lunch, and ride the bus home. We shared something in common with the wise men who came to visit the Christ Child. While we received a gift, they each brought 1 gift. One brought gold, one brought frankincense, and one brought myrrh. What will you offer to the Christ Child? Will you serve at a soup kitchen? Will you help at your local school? Perhaps you will visit a nursing home, send a card to a shut in, or even smile at the cashier at your grocery. Use your

imagination and write your gift on a card and place it under your Christmas tree or list it in your devotional book – your gift to the Christ Child.

Prayer: Heavenly Father thank you for the wise men who came to welcome you into the world. We welcome you in our hearts and offer our gift to you of _____ . Amen

December 13, 2018`

Mickie Galajda

Psalm 119:105-106 Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path. I have taken an oath and confirmed it, that I will follow your righteous laws.

Our sanctuary has been decorated for Christmas during the season of Advent for as long as I can remember. As a collector of nativities, I find the precious nativity in our sanctuary one of my favorites. The set is ceramic and was made and presented as a gift to Reverend Willard Guy and his wife, Helen. The maker and giver of this gift was one of the ladies in Willard's church in Mt. Vernon before he came to us. When it came time to decorate the church for Willard's first Christmas with us, he shared the nativity to be used in our sanctuary. When Willard and Helen retired, they gave the nativity to us, and it has been in our sanctuary ever since.

The first Christmas Reverend Dale Stewart was with us as our minister, he decided to set up the nativity during the worship service on the first Sunday of Advent. The stable was placed on the platform and each child in the congregation was given one of the nativity characters to add to the scene during the worship service. The children sat in the first two pews each one holding one of the nativity pieces. The sanctuary was filled with very, very excited children and very nervous parents. At the appointed time, each child carried his or her piece to the platform and placed it in the scene. The Holy Family

was placed in the stable first, followed by all the others. Each child was so proud to put a piece in the manger scene.

When the nativity set was completed, every piece was positioned as close as possible to the Baby Jesus. The stable was packed with shepherds, kings, camels, cows, goats, angels, Mary, Joseph, and Baby Jesus.

The nativity is worn. One of the angel's wings is missing a piece, and one of the animal's horns is broken. The powerful message of that special Sunday morning is still with us. In this season of Advent, we should all be as close to the Baby Jesus as we can possibly be.

Prayer: Dearest Lord Jesus, We bow before you this day filled with love and thanksgiving. As we have received you into our lives, we have indeed received God's most precious gift. In this season of Advent, let each one of us draw nearer to you and share this precious gift with others. Let us be the people you have called us to be. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen and Amen.

December 14, 2018

Sherri Wiandt

When I think of Christmas coming closer, at times, in my "older" age..... I START TO PANIC!!!! As soon as the very first store puts out the decorations (in July isn't it???), I start thinking..."How am I going to get everything done"???? I have to come up with gift ideas for everyone, get the cards ready to send, plan Christmas Eve and Christmas dinner, get all the decorations up, (which takes several days), bake tons of cookies, and the list goes on....BREATHE,BREATHE,BREATHE!!!!!! Then.....I have to stop myself and think, why get so stressed about it?! This is supposed to be a time of celebration! A time of peace! A time of giving and of love!

Over the years, in our family, we try to make everything simple. But at times, we just don't always succeed at that! I think all of us like to sit and watch everyone else open their presents just to see their reactions of joy, as our own pile of presents just sit there! We have tried to instill in our children the joy of giving is much more special than the joy of receiving! It is really difficult to see someone get tons of gifts and all they say is...I want more!! As it says in 2 Corinthians 9:7 –“Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver”. We strive to be the cheerful “giver” and not the greedy receiver. It's ok to receive the gifts of others...just remember to be gracious in whatever gifts you receive!

This brings to mind some of my childhood Christmas memories. First, growing up, my dad always held on to the German tradition of putting the Christmas tree up on Christmas Eve! We would spend the day baking, making popcorn balls and of course, my dad's famous chocolate fudge (which I make about 3 batches of at Christmas per Allison's request!!). Then, my mom would prepare a delicious steak dinner and we would eat by candlelight. After dinner was done and cleaned up, we would start on the tree. We all had our favorite Christmas bulbs and we had to put the delicate tree topper on, even after it had been broken a few times. It just held too many special memories! Then we would stand back, look for holes to fill with tons of tinsel and then say, “job well done”! After that was done, we would all take our turns locked in the bedroom to wrap our gifts for everyone! There weren't always a lot of gifts, but they looked beautiful under that tree! Once the gifts were wrapped, it was time to gather around to sing Christmas carols. Mom would play the piano, dad would play the accordion and we kids would sing! What a wonderful time we had going to bed with our bellies full, our hearts filled with love and our minds filled with the wonder of Christmas!

One Christmas stands out in my mind from all my years growing up. Yes, we still held onto the traditions I spoke of before, but this

Christmas was a bit different. We did not have a lot growing up, but I never really knew that until just recently. This one Christmas, I was really hoping for a lot of “things”! Being a young teen, I thought I was going to get a lot of the “in” things! Well, we got up that Christmas morning and opened our stockings to the typical stocking items. Then we started on the presents. There were a few clothing items, but I was looking forward to the “wow” gifts! But, what was this? One big box with both my name and my sister’s name on it!! How could this be??? One Gift!!! And I had to share it??? Well, we opened it and what was it?? A record player.....a record player. Ok, I guess it wasn’t too bad, but not quite what I was expecting! After the “let down” in my mind, my mom started to tell my sister and I what dad had gone through to give us this record player. He had purchased the record player kit many months before Christmas. Then he would spend many nights after we went to bed, putting this record player together from scratch and then get up early the next morning to go to work! After I got over my initial feelings of disappointment, I started to think about what dad had done. He didn’t have a lot of money to buy us all those “big” gifts, but he did have a heart of love to try to make us something he thought we could enjoy for years to come. And, yes, we did enjoy it with friends and family for many, many years!

And now, today, I have a family of my own. A wonderful husband and two really great children! I hope Jim and I have instilled in Allison and Cameron the importance of keeping Christ in Christmas. The importance of being a cheerful giver, of taking the time to enjoy being with family and of sharing Christ’s love for all of us!

John 13:34 – “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another”.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

December 15, 2018

Christa Ciotola

“Hi”, I said to the man’s back, “a little cold out here, isn’t it?” He turned around and said “yeah”. “You look like you could use some cookies – would you like these?” I asked. He was kind of stunned looking and said “Seriously? Is this for real?” “Yeah”, I said, “it is. As real as the birth of Christ! Today we can know that his (gesturing all around the graveyard) isn’t the end.” “Wow! Thank you so much!” He threw his arms around me. “That really is what I needed.” He set the whiskey down by the stone and told me he came to remember a man who had been like a father to him, and how he missed him but was grateful for the time they’d had together. As I drove off to my next stop, the whole thing seemed like a dream. We hadn’t even exchanged names! But in that cemetery, in that man’s eyes, I experienced a renewed joy in the coming of Christ.

December 16, 2018

Mickie Galajda

Isaiah 60:1-3 Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. 2 See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and His glory appears over you. 3 Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Aren’t Christmas cards wonderful? I can’t tell you how much I enjoy reading cards almost every day from friends....old friends, new friends, friends I see often, and friends I haven’t seen for years. My favorites are the ones with a Christian message. Cards that tell the story. I would like to share this message from a Christmas card I received several years ago. It reads:

God Sent Us a Savior. If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent us an educator. If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist. If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist. If our

greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer. But our greatest need was forgiveness, so God sent us a Savior. This Christmas, may you see and know anew how great His love is toward you.

Let us pray: Dearest Lord, We praise and thank you that through your life, death and resurrection we have forgiveness, hope, salvation, victory and purpose in our lives. We pray that we will always celebrate Christmas remembering you. Forgive us when we forget. Amen and Amen

December 17, 2018

Al Miller

Many years ago, I was a Sunday School teacher for junior high and high school youth. During advent I invited older members of the congregation to join us and tell of a childhood memory of Christmas. Marlow Gamersfelder was in his nineties so, to the kids that was unimaginatively old. Marlow grew up in the Fresno area on a dead-end country road. Farther up the road lived his cousins. One year on a snowy Christmas Eve Marlow's uncle dressed up as Santa and drove his horse drawn sleigh delivering gifts to the area children. Marlow told us with great emotion how he and his brother, Joe, stood at the front window with tears streaming down their cheeks as Santa road passed their house and did not stop. He and his brother were devastated and felt terribly remorseful for being bad. Ultimately the uncle did stop and gifts were received, but the memory remained vivid. Marlow shared that he and his brother would remind each other yearly to always be good. Whenever he heard sermons how "many are called, but few are chosen" or "Watch out for you know not when the master comes" his memory would return him to the time when Santa passed by and did not stop.

December 18, 2018

Christa Ciotola

Luke 6: 37-38 – "Do not judge others, and God will not judge you; do not condemn others, and God will not condemn you; forgive others, and God will forgive you. Give to others, and God will give to you. Indeed, you will receive a full measure, a generous helping, poured into your hands—all that you can hold. The measure you use for others is the one that God will use for you."

Having a furnace go down on a weekend is not what most of us would consider as being a blessing. But a few weeks ago, it became one for me. Coming in on a Saturday to work on the rental house I recently purchased, I noticed cold air coming from the registers. Not a good sign! So, I called a furnace man recommended by one of my very good friends and he showed up and told me I had a bad circuit board. More bad news! Plus the fact that all the supply houses were closed until Monday.

So, after purchasing some space heaters and running back and forth to town to make sure they didn't blow up, all I could do was be patient. Needless to say, as soon as 7 AM on Monday came, I started calling around for the part. Then I called the furnace guy and offered to pick it up for him. He said he was already at the supply house and had it on his truck, and that after a few small jobs, he would come back into town and take care of it.

Okay, I thought, I've got plenty to do until he gets here. Morning came and went, as did most of the afternoon. Finally, around 4 o'clock my phone rang. He asked if he could just come the next day – the job he was on was more complicated than he thought it would be. I've been on the other side of this conversation, so I tried to muster more patience.

I explained as kindly as I could that I live far away and had a full day scheduled tomorrow, and that he could just give me the part if he was too tired to install it. About 6:45 he showed up. Expecting a

cranky guy with a big overtime fee, I brace myself. But no—he entered the house, jolly as ever. He put the board in, fired the furnace, and I was good to go. Then he started writing the bill. Oh boy, I thought, here it come.

Imagine my surprise, when I saw the bill with NO LABOR charge. He said, “You paid me the other day and I’m not going to charge you twice just because I didn’t have that part with me.” I didn’t know what to say, except “Wow, how do you make it? You’re running your business like I run mine!” A slight smile came across his face as he said, “I know how you run your business, and I what to pay it forward so you that you do a good job.”

I just couldn’t believe it! For weeks I’ve been in a bit of a rough patch on this, both in my business in my personal life, on whether self-sacrifice was really worth it for the greater good. As we left the house at 8:30, I told him that he’d been an answer to my prayers. They say God works in mysterious ways, and that’s how he broken furnace helped fire up a tired spirit.

December 19, 2018

Christa Ciotola

“Hi”, I said to the man’s back, “a little cold out here, isn’t it?” He turned around and said “yeah”. “You look like you could use some cookies – would you like these?” I asked. He was kind of stunned looking and said “Seriously? Is this for real?” “Yeah”, I said, “it is. As real as the birth of Christ! Today we can know that his (gesturing all around the graveyard) isn’t the end.” “Wow! Thank you so much!” He threw his arms around me. “That really is what I needed.” He set the whiskey down by the stone and told me he came to remember a man who had been like a father to him, and how he missed him but was grateful for the time they’d had together. As I drove off to my

next stop, the whole thing seemed like a dream. We hadn't even exchanged names! But in that cemetery, in that man's eyes, I experienced a renewed joy in the coming of Christ.

December 20, 2018

Andrea Yaw

A Christmas Tradition

Luke 2:8-12 – There were some shepherds in that part of the country who were spending the night in the fields, taking care of their flocks. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone over them. They were terribly afraid, but the angel said to them, "Don't be afraid! I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all the people. This very day in David's town your Savior was born—Christ the Lord! And this is what will prove it to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

When our two boys were very young, we discovered Bronner's Christmas Wonderland in Frankenmuth, Michigan. It is a giant store that celebrates Christmas all year long. What a wonderful experience in the middle of summer! We decided to buy an unbreakable nativity and a wood stable that the boys could handle to re-enact the Christmas story without the parents saying, "Look but don't touch!" The next Sunday at church the boys were telling our pastor's wife, Helen Guy, all about it. Later she pulled me aside and shared one of their family traditions that became our tradition too. When we set up our nativity early in Advent Baby Jesus was hidden away until Christmas morning—because he had not yet been born and the others were waiting for Him. Then on Christmas morning Jesus was there in the manger! As years went by somehow the days of Advent turned into search opportunities for Baby Jesus' hiding place. When each child found Him, they left Him in the hiding place and the first one up that morning was privileged to place Jesus in the stable.

The tradition has continued for at least 45 years and is part of our Christmas celebration today. The stable is in place all of Advent with the waiting people inside, sometimes under the tree, sometimes on a table, always where little—or big-- hands can reach it to retell the story.

I am so grateful to Helen for sharing this tradition with us. And now I share it with you. You don't have to be a child to feel a sense of wonder every Christmas and have your heart filled anew with JOY!

May your heart be blessed today with anticipation, joy and love as we wait to celebrate Jesus' birth.

December 21, 2018

Mickie Galajda

John 3:16 – For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.

I have received many wonderful Christmas gifts over the years. Each one special in its own way. As a teacher in Coshocton City Schools, I enjoyed 32 Christmas parties with first graders. Early in my career, many children brought gifts for the teacher to the party. Over the years, we discouraged the giving of teacher gifts. However, I think all the children enjoyed the end of the parties when teachers opened gifts from them. I made it a point to make a fuss over every gift and pass it around so all the children would feel included in the celebration.

One year, I received a precious gift from a first-grade boy who presented me with a gift of love. It came wrapped in a white Kleenex...no card, no ribbon. When I unwrapped the gift, I was delighted with a beautiful pine cone he had probably picked up on his way to school. What a fuss we made over his precious gift. His big

smile was an even greater gift as he watched the others admiring the pine cone as it was passed from child to child.

Christmas is based on an exchange of gifts: The gift of God to man - His unspeakable gift of His Son; and the gift of man to God - when we present our bodies as a living sacrifice (Ro 12:1) and, like the Macedonians (2Cor 8:5), first give ourselves to God. No one has kept or can keep Christmas until he has had a part in this two-way transaction.

My prayer and wish for each of you this day is that you will celebrate the precious gift of God's Son and share the gift with others.

Dearest Lord Jesus, Our hearts are filled with love and thanksgiving as we prepare once again to celebrate your holy birth. As we give and receive gifts this Christmas, let us never forget the most precious gift is YOU! In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen and Amen.

December 22, 2018

Mickie Galajda

Luke 3:4-6 As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God's salvation.'

In an old basket by my rocking chair, I have a collection of Christmas books which I read throughout the season. Our scripture for today

immediately reminded me of my favorite Christmas book, *Kneeling in Bethlehem* by Ann Weems. It is a beautiful collection of poems for the season. Enjoy this poem as you ponder the meaning of this scripture and prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus.

What Do I Want for Christmas?
by Ann Weems

What do I want for Christmas?
I want to kneel in Bethlehem,
The air thick with alleluias,
The angels singing
That God is born among us.

In the light of the Star,
I want to see them come,
The wise ones and the humble.
I want to see them come
Bearing whatever they treasure
To lay at the feet
Of Him who gives His life.

What do I want for Christmas?
To see in that stable
The whole world kneeling in thanks
For a promise kept:
New life.
For in His nativity
We find our own.

Heavenly Father, We confess that we are often unable to make room for you. Our days are too packed with the busyness of life. Our minds are too cluttered with the trivia of our daily pursuits. Our hearts are narrow spaces that have little room for anything but

ourselves. Help us to create space for you and for your beloved Son that we might know you in all of your fullness. Amen and Amen.

December 23, 2018

Stephen Bentley

I was serving in the Hocking Valley Parish for one of my favorite Christmas Memories. Like all of us, I was enjoying time with my family on Christmas morning. Then came the phone call. One of my parishioners was in the hospital. I kissed my wife and family goodbye and I headed out to be with the family. Sure enough, the young wife I had married a year before was in the hospital preparing to deliver her first born son. There in the waiting room were her husband and her parents and her husband's parents. Actually, the husband dashed in and out of the waiting room bringing all of us up-to-date as to how his wife was progressing. Sometime in the late afternoon, she delivered her new little one. I can only imagine how that first Christmas must have seemed to for Joseph and Mary. The only ones in the waiting room were the donkeys and the sheep and maybe an Oxon or two. But I know that they too felt the joy when this new life arrived and they wondered what the future would bring for him.

Prayer: God, waiting can be so hard sometimes and for those giving birth can even be painful through the process. We know the joy at the end is new life. For the one, whose birth we remember this week, we give you thanks in advance for the new life he gives us. Amen.

December 24, 2018

Chris Diles

Matthew 1:18-25 – This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the holy spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a

righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a Dream and said "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name, Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel which means God with us." When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

During the Christmas season, one of our Christmas traditions was attending Christmas Eve service together. It started out as Dick, Chad, Dee and I. Then it was Dick, Chad and I, then Dick and I, and now it is just me attending Christmas Eve by myself. I always looked forward to this service. It is beautiful with the alter adorned with the poinsettias, the message, the songs, and especially lighting our candles at the end of the service while singing Silent Night and then ending with "Joy to the World!!!" It just gives me a wonderful feeling. I also look forward to telling everyone Merry Christmas before leaving and sometimes even getting a hug from some. Time changes not only for me but other families too. The one thing that never changed was the night when Jesus was born a babe in a manger to live and die for each of us. Jesus was with us back then as he is with us today and every day of our lives. He was born for a reason and he died for a reason. Never forget that Jesus is truly the reason for this Christmas Season.

December 25, 2018

Christmas Day

Stephen Bentley

Too few of us spend any time at night anymore looking at the heavens and seeing how beautiful is there to enjoy. Since I can remember, I have been intrigued by the heavens. I remember in my teenage years climbing to on top of our roof at night to see talk to God and look at the stars. I loved to walk back to the vesper spot at Camp Christian when I was there and just gaze at the beauty of the night sky and allow God to speak to my heart. But when something out of the ordinary happens and can be a very scary thing.

While hiking the Appalachian Trail one day, I had a frightening experience. It was Halloween or the day after and I was walking a section alone. I arrived at the shelter late afternoon and discovered some people before me had left little rubber glow in the dark ghosts and goblins. They were finger puppets and neatly arranged on a 2 by 4 above the sleeping area. I laid out my bed and fixed supper and readied myself for a good night's sleep. Once it was dark, I started fire and sat down next to it, to enjoy the night sky.

It was then that I saw something that made my hair stand on end. As I looked north, the sky had turned a deep red. Being deep in southern Virginia, I thought that could only mean one thing: forest fire. I had no idea how far away it was or how fast it was moving but I knew I had to do something quickly. It was about 2 miles back to interstate 81 in Virginia, but it was in the direction of the fire. It was seven miles to the next road south and it would have to be hiked in the dark. In my fear, I made the decision to head south away from the fire even though it was a further walk. I quickly grabbed all my belongings and put them in my pack. As I was preparing to leave, I noticed the sky had changed. No longer was it a deep red. It was white. As I continued to watch, it turned blue, and then back to the deep red I had seen before. It was then that I realized this was not a forest fire. Deep in southern Virginia, I was seeing the Northern Lights. I relaxed and sat for several hours as the Aurora Borealis played out on the northern sky. What at first had scared the

daylights out of me, became something beautiful; a memory I will not forget. I understand these shepherds:

Luke 2: 8-14 – There were some shepherds in that part of the country who were spending the night in the fields, taking care of their flocks. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone over them. They were terribly afraid, but the angel said to them, "Don't be afraid! I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all the people. This very day in David's town your Savior was born—Christ the Lord! And this is what will prove it to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great army of heaven's angels appeared with the angel, singing praises to God: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom he is pleased!"

What had initially brought them fear, became good news; not just for them, but for all people in all times. Go out and enjoy what God often speaks in the night sky. Amen.