



*Huffman United Methodist Church
Birmingham, Alabama
2009*

Advent is always an exciting time at Huffman United Methodist Church. Treasured traditions, moving messages, glorious music, and gorgeous decorations all help to prepare us for the holy message that Christ was born to save us all from sin and death. Our friends and family members come home for Christmas and join to worship together at our church.

This year we are pleased that members of Huffman have given additional meaning to the season with this series of Advent Devotionals to help us prepare. There is a devotional (or two) for every day of the Advent season. A devotional booklet like this is a labor of love and meaning. Thanks to all who penned these devotional messages. In addition, special thanks to Carol O'Rourke for editing and Charlotte McCool, Frances Tyrone, Frank Jett, and Stephanie Sparks for putting the booklet together. Appreciation must also be expressed to the volunteers who prepared it for mailing. And, of course, thanks to Dr. Harris Hand for his support of this project. Please enjoy! We hope to see you during this glorious season at HUMC.

Cover Art by Bob Parker

Sunday, November 29, 2009

Luke 3:1-6

Advent begins with John the Baptist, who gets us ready to meet Jesus. You can't get to Christmas, can't get to Jesus, without hearing John's introduction:

"You bunch of snakes! He's coming to get you! His ax is in his hand; he will cut you down to the root! He's going to separate the good seed from the trash and the trash, he'll cast into the fire! Come down into this muddy water and get baptized!"

"People don't come to church to be criticized and made to feel uncomfortable." That's what a preacher said at a sermon workshop. "Laity come to church to be patted on the head and told that they are doing fine."

So why would anybody listen to John the Baptist?

I think I know. In your better moments, you know you're not right, your world is out of kilter. Only a preacher like John tells the truth: God can change you.

I bet there's someone reading this who's almost dying to hear John preach, somebody wise enough to know that you need to change, somebody courageous enough to want a separation of the good wheat from the trash, somebody open to the ax being laid to the tree so that new life may spring forth, somebody in the wilderness, somebody willing to tolerate a preacher who tells the truth.

Now. You're about to hear the most difficult, bad news that ever was called good. You're about to have your world rocked. Your salvation.

Here's Jesus!

Prayer: Lord Jesus, keep saying things to us we did not expect to hear from you. Come, Lord Jesus, Amen.

***Will Willimon, Bishop of the North Alabama Conference
of the United Methodist Church***

Monday, November 30, 2009

It's a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood

Luke 10:25-29 (*The Message*) - *Just then a religion scholar stood up with a question to test Jesus. "Teacher, what do I need to do to get eternal life?" He answered, "What's written in God's Law? How do you interpret it?" He said, "That you love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and muscle and intelligence - and that you love your neighbor as well as you do yourself."*

"Good answer!" said Jesus. "Do it and you'll live."

Looking for a loophole, he asked, "And just how would you define 'neighbor'?"

Of course, the parable that follows this passage is the ultimate description of a neighbor, the story of the Good Samaritan. We all know the story. The man is attacked by robbers and all of the people he thought were his neighbors passed by and did not help him. Then the Samaritan, his supposed enemy, did stop and help him.

I searched the word neighbor on one of my favorite Bible websites and in *The Message* I found 193 results. Other translations of the Bible averaged about 150 results. Obviously, neighbors and neighborhoods are important to God. We are supposed to love our neighbors and share with our neighbors (Exodus 12) and help our neighbors (Deuteronomy 15).

I grew up in a great neighborhood with lots of children and people who really cared about each other. We took care of each other when necessary, celebrated with each other, and cried with each other. I think our church is doing a good job of being the neighbor that God wants us to be, but I'm sure there is more that we can do for our neighbors. What would you like to see us do to be a better neighbor?

Prayer thought from Mother Theresa: *Never worry about numbers. Help one person at a time, and always start with the person nearest you.*

Prayer: *Dear Lord, show us how to continue to help our neighbors so that they will see Your love in each of us.*

Alma Moore

Monday, November 30, 2009

Faith, Hope, Trust

With economic hard times going on all around us, stress and worry seem to have a strong effect on all of us. I feel very blessed to have a job. Working at UAB I have known several people that have lost their jobs because of cut backs in the work force. My heart hurts for all of those people, because I have been in that situation before myself. I do know that if you keep your faith and trust in God's promise, he will lead you to better days.

These scriptures help me to stay focused on him in both hard times and good times:

Philippians 4:13 - *I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*

Proverbs 3:5-6: *Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.*

Prayer: *Thank you, Lord, for your love and your son Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Hardy Moore

Tuesday, December 1, 2009

We Are Family

Mark 3:31-35 (J. B. Phillips) Then his mother and his brothers arrived. They stood outside the house and sent a message asking him to come out to them. There was a crowd sitting round him when he message was brought telling him, "Your mother and your brothers are outside looking for you." Jesus replied, "And who are really my mother and my brothers?" And he looked round at the faces of those sitting in a circle about him. "Look!" he said. "My mother and my brothers are here. Anyone who does the will of God is brother and sister and mother to me."

Have you ever thought that often times a minister can't be with family if special occasions fall on the weekend? Gerry grew up in Owensboro, KY and Danville, KY was my home. Gerry's parents moved to Anniston, AL when they were opening the GE plant there. But after that plant closed they moved back to Owensboro.

When we married and Gerry received his Bachelor of Divinity degree from Emory University, he joined the North Alabama Conference to be close to his parents. We didn't know at the time that the Hearins would be going back to Kentucky. However, we chose to stay in Alabama.

Over the 50+ years that Gerry was in active ministry we were only able to return to Kentucky one time for Christmas. However, I never felt far from my family. I found that the church wherever we were was family.

Now our immediate family in Kentucky is gone. Who is my family? You are my family. What would I have done when our son, Rob, died and then six weeks later Gerry died? You were there for me. I know that God was there. I felt God's presence, but you were there, too. We are family. When one hurts, we all hurt. When one is happy or celebrates, we all celebrate. That is the church. That is our church, Huffman United Methodist.

What can we give? That is always in our minds this time of year. We can give ourselves to each other and to those outside our doors. Giving of self is more important than something we can buy, but may not last. Love does. We give ourselves to God first, and then to others.

Prayer focus: Dear God, show us how we can be love in action to each other in our church and to those outside our walls.

June Hearin

Wednesday, December 2, 2009

The Cheerful Giver

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.

One of my favorite memories growing up in the church was when our youth group would have the "Adopt-a-Child" program, an event involving our taking a group of children from the inner city shopping for Christmas gifts they wouldn't otherwise be able to buy.

One year in particular stands out. I was paired with a seven-year-old boy named William. Most of the kids were very excited and couldn't wait for the opportunity to shop for new toys, but all William wanted to do was spend his time picking out gifts for his mom, brother, and sister. He wanted nothing for himself. Instead, he wanted to use all of the money we had available on his family.

William was beaming with pride later that day when he returned home with all the wrapped gifts he had bought for his loved ones. Though he had very little himself, his only interest was in giving to others. I often think of William during Advent and how his selflessness is a positive example that what really matters is giving, not getting.

Prayer: God, thank you for all that you have given me, and help me to cheerfully give to others all that I can.

Rich Stanton

Thursday, December 3, 2009

Adopt-a-Child

1 Timothy 4:12 - Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith, and in purity.

The single greatest outreach program I have been a part of is Adopt-a-Child at HUMC. My participation in this program has left me with so many wonderful memories: riding in the church van to West End; driving back to the church with a van full of excited children; taking a list and grabbing a buggy in K-Mart; seeing little kids trying on house shoes for their mothers; along with many other HUMC youth, being the "model" for all kinds of coats; spending an extra \$25 in the checkout line when I realize I've gone over the allotted amount; driving back to the church with bags full of gifts; taking over the fellowship hall with wrapping paper; trying my hardest to wrap a basketball "pretty"; looking around and seeing the youth with smiles as big as those of the kids; knowing that we helped make that Christmas a memorable one. To me, Advent at HUMC can be summed up in Adopt-a-Child and its effects on everyone who participates.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for the opportunity to provide Adopt-a-Child to these children. Please help us to remember the joy of generosity throughout the year.

Amy Gibson

Friday, December 4, 2009

Four-legged Teachers

Proverbs 12:10 (NIV) - A righteous man cares for the needs of his animal.

Read Genesis 9:9-10.

As far back as my memory takes me, the McDowell family have been lovers of animals - especially dogs. I don't ever remember not having a dog, with a doghouse in the backyard or basement, according to the weather. My brother, sister and I were given the responsibility of the dog's care. Usually our current family member "belonged" more to one child than to the others. This child became the dog's "keeper."

Soon after our marriage, Jim and I decided that we would make our four-legged friends members of our household so they could enjoy the upholstered furniture, heat, and air-conditioning as we do. This dedication to our dogs was passed on to our daughter who, in turn, passed it on to her sons, Ryan and Alex. Of course, now each son has a dog of his own.

Through the years we have had many furry friends. Mittens, Preacher, Chip, Penny, Tinkerbell, Dusty, Allie, and currently Katie have taught us love, patience, humility and humbleness. We've learned that love surpasses all. It doesn't matter if you are in a bad mood, feeling "down in the dumps," sick, looking your worst, or suffering from financial problems, your dog only sees someone it loves and admires and will always give you a most enthusiastic greeting. A dog sees beyond all human flaws and only asks for love and acceptance. There is no creature more capable of unconditional love than a dog.

Our dogs have taught us well!

Prayer: Thank you, God, for setting us as stewards over all the creatures of the earth, Amen.

Thought for the Day: Any way we can learn love is a blessing.

Lorene Billups

Saturday, December 5, 2009

Childlike Joy

Luke 2:13-14 (NIV)- And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those whom He favors."

For me Christmas has always been the highlight of the calendar year. Admittedly this season starts about mid-October and lasts until Epiphany. My growing up in a parsonage may have contributed to the feverish delight I always experience during this time, but I credit the biggest influence to my grandfather.

Every Christmas we went to Mt. Holly to visit the grandparents. We could not open our presents until we had held our annual Christmas parade. We four grandchildren used sleigh bells, elephant bells, or any music maker we could find. The parade route changed from year to year according to the weather. On mild days we would parade out the front door, through the yard, up the back porch, through the breakfast room, and onward until we reached the attic. We then retraced our steps until we arrived back in the living room. To this day I do not know if Honey and Gramps' plan was to wear us out prior to opening the gifts or to create a special Christmas memory. I no longer remember opening the gifts, but I still remember vividly the joy of the Christmas parade.

Life needs to be more like a parade. We should avoid the temptation of being only a bystander. Too much goes by unnoticed by the crowd.

Prayer: Dear Lord, we thank you for this time of Advent. Help us to wait patiently for the arrival of your Son. As Christmas approaches, fill our lives with contagious happiness. May our hearts dance with praise and adulation welcoming our Savior. Bring back the joy and wonder of the Christmas season. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

Thought for the day: Joy To the World the Lord Has Come!

Barbara Crowther Kent

Sunday, December 6, 2009

Gifts

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

My favorite Christmas gift as a child was an electric train set. At the time I did not know that my dad had stayed up most of the night getting it set up for me. This was a true gift of love.

As I look back, I remember other gifts from my parents that meant a lot to me: a game of catch in the backyard, vacations every summer even when there was not a lot of money, a new saxophone when I was twelve. I received so many gifts from my parents that let me know I was loved.

The greatest gift my parents gave me, though, was something they taught me - the love of God and His Son. They helped me increase my understanding of this great love by taking me to Sunday School and church, where I saw God's love through others.

During this Advent season, let us remember that the ultimate gift, our most special gift, was a child born in a manger a long time ago. As special as earthly gifts and earthly love are to us, they pale in comparison to our Father's love and His gift of His Son.

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, thank You so much for Your love and the wonderful gift of Your Son, Amen.

Richard Norton

Sunday, December 6, 2009

Sacrificial Love

1 John 4:9-11 (NIV) - This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we ought to love one another.

When I was a child my father was in the Air Force and was sometimes stationed overseas where we could not go with him. The year I was six years old he was stationed in Newfoundland and, after many months, was coming home for Christmas. I adored my father and just couldn't wait to see him.

The day of his arrival, we enjoyed good family time. As bedtime approached, I couldn't stand the thought of being separated from him, even for one night! I yawned, stretched, looked around the room and said, "Well, I guess it's about time to talk about who's going to sleep with who." Now, I'm sure my parents had planned on a little private time after my brother and I went to bed, but they just smiled at each other, then went and pulled mattresses into the living room so we could all four sleep on the floor together.

Looking back on this now, I realize what love and sacrifice my parents showed in this act. How blessed I was to have parents who could teach me about love, so I could also one day understand about God's love!

Prayer: Dear Father, thank You for Your love! Please help us live our lives so others may see You in us, Amen.

Anita Norton

Monday, December 7, 2009

The Pink Pig

Psalms 138:1 (NRSV) - I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart.

For many years our family has begun the holiday season with a ceremony of the Pink Pig. The pig itself is made of peppermint candy and comes in a draw-string purple velvet bag accompanied by a small silver hammer.

We all, about twenty of us, gather around the kitchen island at our house. The pig in its bag is placed on a large cutting board and the ceremony begins. Jim, the oldest one present, starts by sharing what he is most grateful for during the past year. Then, with the hammer, he strikes the pig, which is still in the bag, and the candy begins to shatter. Next it is my turn. The ceremony continues as each person tells a story of gratitude before striking the pig in the bag. By the time we get to the youngest, Abby, there is seldom a dry eye in the group. In closing, we take the broken pieces of candy from the bag and everyone tastes.

We have found that this time of sharing reminds us of how much we love one another and how blessed we truly are.

Prayer: O gracious God, give us grateful hearts and wisdom to seek Your way for our lives, Amen.

Betty Nash

Tuesday, December 8, 2009

Love: The Greatest Commandment

Matthew 22: 37-39 (NIV) - Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

In this passage from Matthew, one of the Pharisees, an expert in religious law, questions Jesus about the most important commandment. The lawyer probably expected a debate. Instead, Jesus goes straight to the bottom line: Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind.

Because the Pharisees had been so busy making certain they avoided any violation of the more than 600 laws, they had lost sight of the very heart of the matter which is loving God.

Perhaps we too have lost sight of the things that matter most. With meetings to attend, emails to answer, appointments to keep, phone calls to make, housework and yardwork to complete, our to-do list is overloaded! We must not let a busy schedule of seemingly necessary activities keep us from remembering God's first and greatest commandment. God wants to be our first and number one love. It also follows that loving God empowers us to love other people.

Prayer: Thank you, Father, for Your example of perfect love. Forgive us for loving You with less than our whole heart. Teach us how to love, praise, and worship You in all we do. Give us the grace to respond with Your love to those You put in our path, Amen.

Thought for the Day: We always have time for the things we put first.

Mary Ann Martin

Wednesday, December 9, 2009

Christmas Anticipation

Luke 2:10-12 - But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

A blanket of snow covered the South for the Christmas of 1963. My sister and I traveled to Mentone by train to visit our grandparents. Soon after our arrival, we went to the woods to choose a tree. We found a beautiful cedar that was just the right size for our grandparents' cottage. My sister and I were so excited. The anticipation of Christmas morn was uppermost in our minds. Since we couldn't open our presents until our parents arrived, time seemed to crawl like molasses going uphill in a snowstorm. Finally, they arrived. We all gathered in the living room. The time had come.

Thought: How much do we anticipate the celebration of the coming of the Christ Child? Do we let it get lost in the commercial side of the Christmas season? Can we anticipate His coming for an extended period of time without losing our wide-eyed wonder?

Prayer: May the anticipation of Christmas that so filled your life as a child be renewed in your soul.

Laura Bathurst

Thursday, December 10, 2009

The Kingdom of God Is at Hand

Mark I:14-15 (KJV) - "Now after that John was put into prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel.' "

Of all the gospels, I think the gospel of Mark is my favorite. For me, it reads like an eyewitness account of the events surrounding the life and mission of Jesus. Mark is probably the least referenced gospel during Advent. This is probably because Mark does not spend any time recounting the journey of the Magi, the shepherds abiding in their fields, or any of the other stories we associate with the birth of Jesus and Christmas. Rather, he sticks with just what he saw and heard and, for me, he gets right to the heart of the matter.

According to Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, the word "advent" applies to " a momentous or conspicuous arrival, an appearance upon a scene, esp. for the first time or a beginning." It seems to me this is just what Jesus does here in the opening chapter of Mark. Jesus is baptized by John and a voice from heaven announces that "Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." And then immediately Jesus is driven into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan, threatened by the wild beasts, and comforted by the angels. When John's ministry is cut short by his arrest, then Jesus comes into Galilee and says, " The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand."

Notice what Jesus does not do. He does not start off by saying, "Hey, listen to me; I'm the Son of God." For Jesus, Jesus himself was not the good news. The good news that Jesus came to bring was that the long wait for the kingdom of God was over. It was here and now. And what do you have to do to join the kingdom? Repent and believe the good news. It seems to me that this is a very simple formula. Yet it certainly had a profound effect on those who heard those words and set into motion events which still echo in the world today.

Being human, we may think this is too easy. There has to be a catch somewhere. So let's take a moment to examine the words of Jesus. First, "The time is fulfilled." The Jews had been waiting for centuries for that to happen, for the promises made to Abraham, Moses, and the prophets to come to pass. Those

Thursday, December 10, 2009

promises boil down to the promise that the kingdom of God would be established here and now on the earth. You may ask me, "Well, where is it then?" The very next words are "The kingdom of God is at hand."

As an act of faith, try this: stretch out your hand right now. Look at it for a moment or two. Where is your hand? Well, it seems to be stuck on the end of your arm, which is, in turn, connected to your torso. It's likely that you also have a head that is also stuck to your torso, although you cannot see your head from this perspective. (By the way, not being able to see your head should not prevent you from using it.) So, back to the question. Where is the kingdom of God? Why, it is as plain as the hand in front of your face. It is right here and now.

What? You don't believe it? Well, funny you should say that because Jesus follows right up with "repent and believe." So if you don't believe you are in the very kingdom of God, then you could be a part of the problem. What is the remedy? Repent! Turn away from whatever it is that is keeping you from participating in the kingdom. And, then, believe in the words of Jesus. After all, He knows what He is talking about. And our Father was well pleased with Him and the message he brought to us.

Prayer: Lord, help us to open our eyes to see and open our ears to listen. Help us to see that which is preventing us from getting close to Jesus. Give us the strength to sweep away any obstacles and help us to find the path to Your Kingdom, in the name of Jesus, Amen.

George Inzer

Friday, December 11, 2009

Gifts

I Peter 4:10 (NIV) - Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.

Recently everyone at our church has been reminded to "Celebrate the Gift!" As we consider Advent a season of waiting, I am reminded of past Advent seasons in my own life when I waited to receive the gift of really feeling the true joy of Christmas, a special moment when I would know in my heart that Christmas had arrived. Always I would be caught up in outward trappings of the season: shopping, wrapping, baking, decorating, parties, Christmas cards. But each year I also waited for a special reminder of the gift God gave us on Christmas, the earthly birth of his Son. Here are a few moments through the years when the true joy of Christmas came to me:

Listening to a duet of "O Holy Night" sung by friends, a husband and wife;

Experiencing at a service here at HUMC Mickey Crabtree reciting from memory the Christmas Story from Luke;

Going back to a childhood memory of my dad portraying a "wise man" in our church's Christmas program, singing "We Three Kings;"

In later years, hearing my five-year-old daughter sing a verse of "Away in the Manger" at a Christmas church service;

Going with my Sunday School class and our children to take gifts and food to a family. Their joy was contagious!

And last, attending many years of late Christmas Eve Communion services at HUMC where we lit the candles of those we loved standing next to us.

All of these moments are gifts to celebrate. I hope you can remember some of your own special moments.

Prayer: As the scripture from I Peter instructs, may we take the true gifts we receive this Advent season and pass them forward to others in the coming year.

Anne Smith

Saturday, December 12, 2009

Love

John 3:16 - *For God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*

1Corinthians 13:13 - *Now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.*

1John 4:19 - *We love Him because He first loved us.*

Love is talked about a lot in the Bible. What do you love?

I love God, my parents, my church, my cousins, my aunts & uncles, my grandparents, my dog, my friends, and my teachers. I love life!

God has more love than any of us! He showed us His love in the gift of His Son.

My Aunt Tina died last year just two days before Christmas. Aunt Tina was special for lots of reasons. One thing that made her special to most people was that she was born with Down Syndrome. She was also special because she knew how to really love people. She loved people no matter what they wore, what they looked like, or how old they were.

I still miss Aunt Tina. I will probably cry this Christmas because I do miss her, but I will also remember how much she loved me and I loved her. This will help me to remember how important it is to let people know that you love them and to share the story of God's love.

If the love that we have for our family is great, how great is the love of God? Share His love!

Prayer: Dear God, help us to remember the gift of Your love. Help us to share Your love with the people that we meet. Remind us to be loving, caring, and kind to everyone we know, Amen.

Viktoria Solfronk

Saturday, December 12, 2009

An Amazing Gift

***John 1:1-5** - In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God. He was with God in the beginning. Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made. In Him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.*

***John 1:10-12** - He was in the world, and though the world was made through Him, the world did not recognize Him. He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him.*

***John 1:14** - The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

At Christmas we celebrate the birth of Jesus. When He came into the world as a baby, He was sent from heaven to earth to become the living expression of God the Father. This was God's gift for mankind. His very life would speak to us everything that God ever wanted to say to us about Himself. What an amazing gift!

Have you ever stopped to consider this concept? God wanted to communicate with us so intimately that He sent Jesus to be the living demonstration of His heart. As we dwell on Jesus Christ and His Word, we realize that God is still speaking through His living expression to transform us not just this Christmas season, but every day.

Hear what God has for you today and share the joy, the love and the amazing gift of Christmas.

Prayer: Gracious Father, thank You for Your amazing gift. Help me this day to hear Your Word, to take what I receive and apply it to my life that I might demonstrate Your love and glorify You, Amen.

Deana Solfronk

Sunday, December 13, 2009

In Anticipation of Christmas

The meaning of Advent is the anticipation of the birth of Christ and is remembered in the four weeks before Christmas. This season of Advent was always an exciting time for me when I was a child. It was the most special time of the year!

I have always loved the stories about Christmas. There are so many wonderful stories about the birth of Jesus and other stories that relate to this joyous season. They make this time of the year so warm and special.

I was born in Ohio, and one Christmas there was a carillon built in a park in town. A Christmas concert was presented, and we went to the park and stood in the cold to listen to the beautiful music. Even though I was very young at the time, I will always remember this beautiful Christmas concert.

We always had a miniature creche in our house during the Christmas season. It was my job to set it up each year. Once we went to a local cathedral that had an amazing manger scene. The figures at the altar were life size, and the side walls were decorated with animals walking toward the altar. The figures farthest away were small. The figures a little closer were somewhat larger. The figures nearest the altar were almost as large as the life size ones at the altar. The artist's use of perspective made everything seem so real. I have never forgotten seeing this.

As an adult, I cherish the smells of Christmas, the wonderful music, and the special Christmas movies. It all blends together to make this such a special time of year, all in anticipation of Christmas Day.

Barbara Garner

Monday, December 14, 2009

Baby's First Christmas

Luke 2-7: ...and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son.

I will never forget James' first Christmas. He was only a month old. Rick Owen asked Jeremy and me to play a special part in the service that year since Christmas fell on a Sunday.

We got to church early and put on robes. At the beginning of the service, we walked down the aisle, playing the parts of Mary, Joseph, and the Baby Jesus. I remember sitting on the steps while the organ played, looking at James with tears in my eyes and thinking how blessed we were to have such a wonderful son.

I wondered how Mary must have felt that first Christmas. As she looked into the eyes of God's Son, her precious baby, she must have felt the blessing of God, just as I did. A child is an amazing gift, and Jesus, sent down from Heaven to be born a child, is God's greatest gift to all who choose to believe.

Prayer: Dear God, please help me to remember all the many blessings You have given me and help me to stop and give thanks this Christmas season, Amen.

Jenny Auvil

Monday, December 15, 2009

Prayer Warriors

1 Thessalonians 5:17 - Keep on praying.

My mother was my personal prayer warrior. The last five or so years of her life she was unable to be physically active, so she made up for this by praying. Something going on in my life? Ask Mom to pray. The kids were up to something - Mom was on it. Nothing was too small or insignificant for her to pray about. Then Mom died. I miss so many things about her, but her prayers I miss the most. When my son left for a five month journey walking the Appalachian Trail - by himself - I felt worried that my prayers alone would not suffice.

One day my sister called. She said she had been praying daily for my son. She said she was trying to do what Mom would be doing. I know Mom would be proud.

Too often time for prayer gets lost amidst the business of living. It's easy to forget. Then something happens to remind me of the importance of staying grounded in a meaningful prayer life. Last week I came home and found a message from our own HUMC prayer team. My family was being prayed for. During Sunday School this week a card was slipped under the door. The Sunday School children had been praying for our class. The minister's sermon was about prayer and praying. All these people - praying for people they know and people they don't know. They make a difference. They make a difference in people's lives. They make a difference in my life. Prayer is not just important. It is necessary.

Prayer: Thank you , Father, for Prayer Warriors and their ministry to others.

Melissa Sutton

Wednesday, December 16, 2009

The Piano

John 3:16 - *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*

I fell in love with pianos when I was very young. Believing that a piano was a beautiful and magical thing, I was certain that if I could have one of my very own, I would never want anything else for the rest of my life. Sadly, I also knew there was little chance I would ever possess something so grand and expensive.

Then, on my eighth Christmas morning, my heart almost exploded with joy when I rushed into the living room to find, in all its shiny mahogany glory, a PIANO. The impossible had happened. My greatest wish had been granted. I still remember the loving smile on my mother's face as she basked in my happiness.

Years passed before I realized the sacrifices my mother had made in order to make my dream come true. She had worked many long hours of overtime and done without many things I am certain that she really needed.

The piano, which remains with me to this day, serves as a symbol of my mother's love and sacrifice. Of course, this is just one example of my mother's showing her love for me. Hers was a love that never wavered, even when I sometimes failed to meet the high standards she set for her only daughter. I always knew that, no matter what, she loved me.

It has long been my belief that when we personally experience the love of a parent for a child, we are then better able to comprehend the awesome nature of the love that God has for us, His children.

Prayer: Our Father in Heaven, let us find peace and comfort in the knowledge that Your love for us is powerful, constant and unconditional, Amen.

Carol Harvey O'Rou

Wednesday, December 16, 2009

My 69th Advent and the Second Coming

Matthew 24:36 (NIV) - "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, not the Son, but only the Father."

When I realized that 2009 would be my 69th Advent season, I was more than a little disoriented. I can only recall bits and pieces of about 60 of those Advents -- wreaths, candles, the color purple, the flowers and other seasonal decorations in the sanctuary, the Christmon tree, splendid choirs sending chills up my spine, and the phrases of so many ministers about preparing for both the Nativity and the Second Coming of Christ -- a colorful and comfortable blur of images and pious sentiments from over six decades.

So why was I disoriented and ill at ease?

Because when I counted up all my Advents I had a sense that, no matter how old I have become, I am still very near the beginning of my understanding of what the coming of Christ into our world really means and my grasp of what the Second Coming might be like is even more elusive and overwhelming.

Prayer: Great Kind Father, Giver of Every Good and Perfect Gift, as we approach this season of gift-giving, I ask for only a small gift. What I want is a small boost in my ability to discern what it means that You sent Your Son to live amongst us. And, Father God, help me to feel I am progressing in my appreciation and understanding of the already accomplished Nativity and the still expected Second Coming, Amen.

Warren O'Rourke

Thursday, December 17, 2009

Christmas in July

Luke 2:14 - Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, good will to men.

Christmas is a special time for most people. It is certainly very special to me. I think about the season long before it arrives, considering decorations, goodies to cook, people to see, and on and on! Those who know me well know this about me.

One Sunday night in July, we returned from a trip and discovered a message on our phone from Amy. The message was: "Mitchie, I've got something for you - it's for Christmas. I got it at the Junior League Carousel. You'll love it. Don't tell Les."

Well, of course, Les heard the message, and we both began to speculate about the Christmas "treasure." Soon Amy brought it over, and I learned I was now the proud owner of a five foot, four tiered Christmas stand. At first, Les was not sure about this new addition; however, I certainly was. I could just see how wonderfully that stand would display all my small Christmas items. .

As Christmas approaches, we pray and study and prepare, but sometimes it takes a wonderful surprise to jumpstart our thinking and to remind us to open our hearts for the coming of the Christ-child.

Prayer: Lord, open our hearts and minds to Your glory and presence as we make our way through the days of Advent, Amen.

Mitchie Neel

Friday, December 18, 2009

The Gift of Love

Colossians 3:12-14, 17 - Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.

In the fall of 1871, a church was founded in a rural area of Birmingham. This church was first known as Oak Grove Methodist but was later renamed Huffman Methodist. This year as we gather to celebrate the birth of our Messiah, we join all the other Christians who have praised God in this place for 138 years.

As the Advent season approaches, we should remember the rich tradition of Huffman United Methodist Church. May we strive to continue to be God's people by loving each other and finding ways to reach out in love to others. There is no better way to show that we are true disciples of Jesus Christ than by our love.

Prayer: Dear Father, help us to love each other unconditionally like You love us. Give us the strength to continue to be Your servants at Huffman UMC. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

Diane Lankford Dunn

Saturday, December 19, 2009

The Gift of a Star

Matthew 2:10 (NLT) - When they saw the star, they were filled with joy!

Read Matthew 2:1-12.

Last year I had the opportunity to spend Christmas at a mission house I have come to love in Victoria, Mexico. The trip was wonderful! Along with some dear friends, I spent the holidays celebrating the twenty-fifth wedding anniversary of our mission pastor and his wife.

It was not until things quieted down on Christmas Eve that I experienced an ache in my heart for the holiday hustle and bustle, pot luck of food, and hellos and goodbyes from familiar faces at home. I found myself sitting out under the stars and just looking up. It was during that quiet moment that I received perhaps the best Christmas gift ever. I remember leaning back, looking at the blanket of stars, and wondering what it must have been like that night so long ago to see a star stand out from all the others in the sky, announcing the birth and guiding the Magi to the Christ Child.

As I sat there thinking about the magic of that moment and missing my family, I remember thinking how amazing it would be to see a shooting star. I don't think I even had time to blink when an indescribable streak of light shot across the sky. It was a priceless gift of a moment I will never forget.

Stephanie Sparks

Sunday, December 20, 2009

Are You Fortunate or Blessed?

Philippians 2:15b - ...you must shine among them like stars lighting up the sky.

Do you ever hesitate or fail to express your praise or gratitude that God so richly deserves? Oh, it's easy to do this on Sundays or in church related environments. Then we find it easy to say things like "We are so blessed" or "Praise God" when there is a solution to some hardship.

The comments we are more likely to make Monday through Friday when the same solution occurs are "We were so fortunate" or "They were lucky to get out of that." In public, we hesitate to give credit directly to God for positive outcomes.

Most of us would agree that witnessing our faith to others is not the easiest thing to do. To witness to others you don't always have to share the Four Spiritual Laws. You can (and will) reveal something about your relationship with Christ when you outwardly praise God for His countless blessings. Make yourself known this season as a believer in this ever-increasing world of unbelief.

Allen Gillespie

Sunday, December 20, 2009

Accept What You Have

Luke 2:7 - "No room in the Inn."

Just like what Mary and Joseph did with the inn, accept what you have. Don't be sad when you don't get what you want. At least you have the things you need. You really don't need that new cell phone, car, or computer. Even though they are nice things to have, you don't really need them.

Merry Christmas!

Pray Philippians 4:12-13 - "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through Him who gives me strength."

Desi Gillespie

Monday, December 21, 2009

Pivotal Moments

The story of Gabriel's visit to inform Mary that she had found favor with God and would bear the Messiah was a pivotal moment in history. And, as in most pivotal moments in history, one different word or phrase can, in theory, change the way events turn out. For instance, what if Mary had refused to be responsible for such an important task as bearing the child? What would God have done? Or, did she really have a choice? Of course, this is never discussed in the Bible because Mary accepted this task so graciously by saying, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to Your word." (Luke 1:38)

Why would Mary accept this responsibility so willingly? It is because God's Will was more important to her than her own will. This was a characteristic that she passed on to her Son. When He was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, He expressed this same preference for God's Will over His own when He said, "Take this cup away from me, but not what I will but what You will." (Mark 14:36)

Prayer: Help us, Lord, to prefer Your will over our own. Amen.

Harris Hand

Monday, December 21, 2009

The Reluctant Servant

One Christmas Eve the children and I attended the candlelight service at our church. Following the service, I discovered that it was Harris' responsibility to deliver the remaining poinsettias to the local nursing home. Even though what I really wanted to do was to get the children home and to bed as soon as possible, instead we loaded fifty poinsettias and three children into the church van.

When we arrived at the nursing home, the staff asked us to help deliver the flowers to the different residents. I will never forget the smiles on the faces of the patients as the children entered their rooms, sharing hugs and Christmas carols with everyone. Each room they visited changed from a silent and lonely room to a place of love and Christmas cheer.

Later, as I reflected on the events of that Christmas Eve, I realized that God had given this "reluctant servant" the opportunity to share our precious children with people who were all alone on a dark Christmas Eve. I was reminded of the fact that God had willingly shared his precious son, Jesus, with a lonely world on that dark night in Bethlehem.

Myra Hand

Tuesday, December 22, 2009

God Hears My Every Prayer

Matthew 7:7(NIV) - Ask and it will be given to you.

One day not so long ago, I was sitting in my recliner during my morning quiet time. As usual, I began praising God for all the big and wonderful things he has created, and lastly, His creation of human beings just like me. Soon, I moved on to examine my conscience and confess my sins of the past day. Finding none (!), I mused about some "biggies" of days gone by. It made me feel sad and downhearted. Then, the question came to me: Have I ever really understood how much I am loved by God? Wanting to be reassured, I thought, "Oh, if I could only have a big hug."

Knock! Knock! "Oh, my goodness, there's someone at the door!" When I got to the door, there was no one there. Stepping outside, I saw a little boy walking away. He turned when he heard the door open and extended both his arms toward me. I beckoned him to come. He then encircled me with his arms as I held his little shiny black forehead, giving him a warm kiss. When he walked away, he gave me a look of reassurance, a little knowing smile!

Prayer: Jesus, You hear and answer my smallest desire! How can I not be assured of your ever-present love?

Olga Veit

Wednesday, December 23, 2009

Choices

Read Luke 15: 3-7

Luke 15:4 - If you had one hundred sheep, and one of them strayed away and was lost in the wilderness, would not you leave the ninety-nine others to go and search for the lost one until you found it?

"My name is Susan and I am an alcoholic." There, I said it, standing on trembling knees and with a pounding heart in front of a room of strangers who shared this terrifying and baffling disease with me. My journey toward recovery began that night.

In the dark days of recovery, knowing that there was nothing in this world that could keep me from my Father's love and that He was always waiting for me to find my way back to His open arms, gave me hope. Much like the shepherd who kept looking for the one lost sheep, that hope and knowledge of Jesus' powerful love for me and my husband's never wavering belief in me, slowly nudged me toward a new life. Yes, it was possible to live without alcohol. It was not easy, not easy at all, but it was a choice I could make to change my life.

When I am discouraged or tempted, I try to remember that I am safely in the arms of my Father. He understands me when I do not understand myself and will always be there watching over me.

Prayer: Father, help us to remember that You will give us strength to survive any trial. Thank You for Your never ending love.

Prayer Focus: Those struggling with addiction.

Susan Johnson

Thursday, December 24, 2009

Wonderful Anticipation

Luke 2:19-20 - Mary kept all these things to herself, holding them dear, deep within herself. The shepherders returned and let loose, glorifying and praising God for everything they had heard and seen. It turned out exactly the way they'd been told!

During the season of Advent, our actions revolve around themes of waiting, preparing, anticipating, and many other activities that reflect our experience of the coming Christ child. Nearly six years ago, the arrival of Hannah Marie on December 25, altered my Advent and Christmas experience forever in a newly meaningful way.

Throughout the Advent season I experienced daily waiting and preparation and anticipation without any sense of exactly what and when something wonderful and life-changing would occur. I was able to identify with Mary as an expectant mother in a way I had never imagined. The 11:00 PM Christmas Eve service that year dismissed into one of the coldest nights ever, but I remember the warmth of the service and fellowship surrounding me as we shared early Christmas wishes with friends on the steps of the church.

The next day my Christmas experience changed forever. Now, every year since 2003, I reflect on both past and future times of contemplation about what is to come in the year ahead for me, my family, and my church. It is truly a time of anxious anticipation mixed with the wonderful knowledge that there is something amazing in store for all of us throughout and beyond the Advent season.

Sarah O'Kelley

Thursday, December 24, 2009

Accepting the Specialness of Advent

1 Peter:13-16 (from the Message) - So roll up your sleeves, put your mind in gear, be totally ready to receive the gift that's coming when Jesus arrives. Don't lazily slip back into those old grooves of evil, doing just what you feel like doing. You didn't know any better then; you do now. As obedient children, let yourselves be pulled into a way of life shaped by God's life, a life energetic and blazing with holiness. God said, "I am holy; you be holy."

Truth be told, Advent is just like every other part of the year...except that it's not. Each January we pledge to carry the "Christmas spirit" with us throughout the New Year. It sounds exhilarating. It sounds easy. We just celebrated the birth of our Savior. We just opened many wonderful gifts. We just spent invaluable time with our family. "From now on, everyday will be Christmas!" we proclaim. So we power through another list of self-improvements with every genuine intention to make "this year" better than the last.

And then something funny happens. Mid-January comes and we stumble over our first resolution. February comes and we realize that work is no more a happy place than it ever was. We should be happy just to have a job, but we are not. March comes and we have already started to fast-forward our time and our lives in the hope that one or two weeks of summer vacation will get us away from the world that three months ago we had been so willing to improve. Then the vacation isn't as great as we had hoped. It rains at the beach. We come home, and life hits us in the face again. A friend or family member is sick. A loved one passes. "Why am I yelling at my children all the time?"

Truth be told, Advent is nothing like every other part of the year. As Christians, we need Advent like the bunny needs his battery. It is a season to recharge. It is the feeling of renewal. It is the promise of hope in a life made in relationship with Jesus Christ. It is special. And that's OK.

Kevin O'Kelley

Friday, December 25, 2009 -- Christmas Day

It Really Is the Birthday of Christ

2 Corinthians 5:17 - "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"

Those who know me know that I tend to get hung up on trying to find meaning in the literal interpretation of the Bible. Some of it seems contradictory or immoral, and some is factually inaccurate. Christmas as Jesus of Nazareth's birthday is one of those things that could trip me up. Truthfully, we don't know when Jesus was born. Does that mean it is silly to anticipate and celebrate December 25th every year?

I don't think so. After all, the Christian story is still being written. It didn't end after the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus because ever since then, Christ has been born and reborn in people throughout history. Christ still moves and breathes and acts in this world through those who allow him to be born again and again.

Advent is a time when I ask myself if Christ is fully living through me. The truth is that I spend most of my time in labor, groaning, pushing, resting, then groaning again, all while trying to give birth to the full spirit of Christ. I know it's in me, but I know that a full expression of His spirit through me is a rare thing. As Christmas approaches, I am reminded to once again ask Christ to be born in me, to express through me, and to open my wary heart.

As lovely as that sounds, I'm a realist who likes to have a plan, so I don't stop there. I also take this time to get a picture in my mind of what a life lived inspired by the Christ spirit looks like in reality. I look to Jesus, and you might be surprised at what I see.

Though Jesus was kind and loving, those very qualities gave him a passionate nature. He didn't just come to comfort the lonely, the forgotten, the poor, the sick, and the lost. He came to fight for them. I look at Jesus and see that He wasn't concerned about their "hereafter." He was concerned about their "here and now."

I believe that when I allow Christ to fully live through me, I won't be some quiet, benevolent saint. Instead, I'll be a passionate, justice seeking, joy-filled firebrand. Maybe that's why labor is so hard and long. Christ is huge and His impact on my life and my world will be huge. Every year, as Christmas approaches, I pray for the courage to allow Christ to be born in me.

I hope you'll pray for me as I pray for all of you.

Kathy Henson

Saturday, December 26, 2009

Advent - The Coming of the Presence of God

John 12:44-46 (NRSV)... Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness.

An Advent reading that I have really appreciated:

If you want God, and long for union with him, yet sometimes wonder what that means or whether it can mean anything at all, you are already walking with the God who comes. If you are at times so weary and involved with the struggle of living that you have no strength even to want [God], yet are still dissatisfied that you don't, you are already keeping Advent in your life. If you have ever had an obscure intuition that the truth of things is somehow better, greater, more wonderful than you deserve or desire, that the touch of God in your life stills you by its gentleness, that there is a mercy beyond anything you could ever suspect, you are already drawn into the central mystery of salvation.

From *The Coming of God* by Maria Boulding
Liturgical Press, 1982, quoted in
A Guide to Prayer for All God's People,
By Rueben P. Job and Norman Shawchuck
Nashville: The Upper Room, 1990

Prayer: O God - our creator and sustainer, Jesus - our teacher and redeemer, Spirit - our guide and our friend, with joyful hearts we celebrate anew your gracious presence with us.

Charlotte McCool

Sunday, December 27, 2009

Glorifying God

Psalm 8

Not many folks, except a few choir members, know my favorite song is "How Great Thou Art." I oftentimes sing it when I am alone at home, working in the garden, or walking the dogs. Not only do I love the tune, but some of the phrases provide such inspiration that in some ways echo my feeling about how God works in our world today. A few of my favorite lines are "when I in awesome wonder consider all the worlds Thy hands have made," and "He bled and died to take away my sins," and especially "then I bow down in humble adoration and there proclaim, my God, how great Thou art."

Inspiration to me, yes, and hope for us all, you bet. No matter whether it is sung to the classic melody or some other musical variation, this beautiful tribute to the glory of God always refreshes and emotionally uplifts my soul. So the next time you want to experience the joy of God's greatness, sing a few bars. By the way, God does not mind if you don't have a great voice!

Prayer: In this Advent season help choirs to be an inspiration to all of us, Amen.

John Alex Floyd, Jr.

Advent Calendar 2009

November 29th

Your Redemption Is Nigh

Luke 21:25-36

December 6th

Prepare the Way of the Lord

Luke 3:1-6

6:00 pm ***Shepherds, Sheep and a Savior***

Presented by our Children's Choir

December 13th

From These Stones

Luke 3:7-18

Special guests, Chansoniers Reunion Group

December 20th

Lessons and Carols by Chancel Choir

Zeal for God

Luke 1:39-55

December 24th

5:00 pm ***God Comes to Us***

Luke 2:1-20

Child Care Provided

11:00 pm ***The Grace of God Has Appeared***

Titus 2:11-14

No Child Care Provided

December 27th

Jesus: Treasure of Our Hearts

Luke 2:41-52