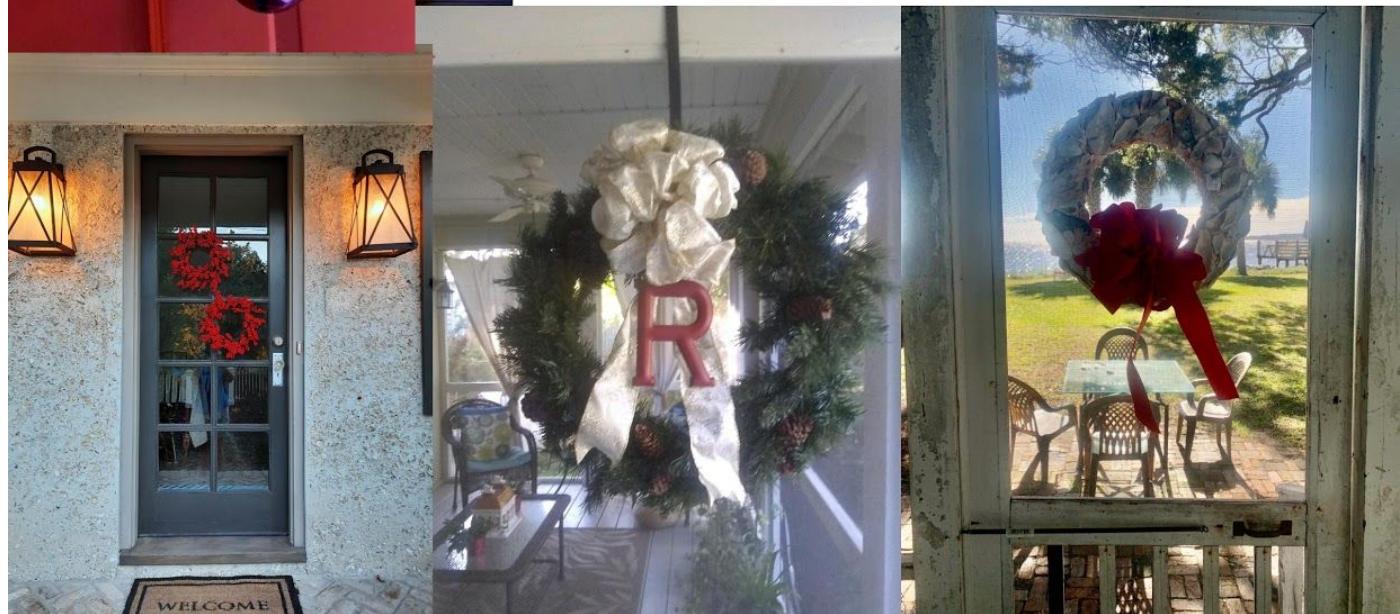




HOME TO HOME: WATCHING & WAITING

ADVENT DEVOTIONS 2020

ST. SIMONS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH



SSPC ADVENT CALENDAR 2020

DECEMBER 2 OUTDOOR ADVENT FESTIVAL - 5PM WITH ALTERNATIVE GIVING MARKET ON SSPC VERANDA

DECEMBER 16 CAROLING CAR PARADE - 4:30PM MEET IN SSPC BACK PARKING LOT
CHANCEL ENSEMBLE CAROLS - 6:15PM UNDER PORTICO IN BACK PARKING LOT AT SSPC

DECEMBER 18&19 LIVE NATIVITY - 6PM & 7PM

DECEMBER 24 LESSONS & CAROLS SERVICE - 4:30PM FRONT LAWN AT SSPC & ONLINE

SSPC ADVENT SERMON SERIES

CHRISTMAS VACATION TOUR OF HOMES: MARK, MATTHEW, JOHN & LUKE

SUNDAYS BEGINNING NOVEMBER 29 // LIVE STREAM 8:30 & WORSHIP AT FREDERICA ACADEMY TENT 10:30

**MAKE YOUR OWN FAMILY ADVENT WREATH AT THE OUTDOOR ADVENT FESTIVAL ON DECEMBER 2. THE INSTRUCTIONS FOR LIGHTING THE CANDLES ARE ON EACH SUNDAY.

**EACH SUNDAY'S DEVOTION INCLUDED IN THIS BOOK IS REPRINTED FROM A PREVIOUS SSPC ADVENT BOOK IN REMEMBRANCE OF SOME OF OUR SSPC "SAINTS."

blessed be the season
smelling of fir needles scattered on the floor
like snow blanketing the ground
house windows like torches casting
a soft, warm glow
holly breath wreaths the celebratory sentinels to
a small, quiet Christmas
kind of like that first silent night
muted.
anticlimactic.
miraculous.



excerpt from *Bless It: Reflections from a Pandemic*
by Kate Buckley

HOME TO HOME: WATCHING & WAITING

ADVENT DEVOTIONS 2020 ~ ST. SIMONS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

FOREWORD WRITTEN BY FRIEDA WARNER

HOW THE GRINCH-Y PANDEMIC STOLE CHRISTMAS.... OR NOT

Have you seen the new Grinch-y Pandemic ornament for Christmas 2020? Three words, and I quote ... *stink, stank, stunk!*

I love the original Grinch movie from 1966 and remember watching when it first appeared on our family TV over 50 years ago! Max, the dog, was my favorite. So much so, my only stuffed animal from childhood that I still have is a dog I named Max. In more recent years, I enjoyed seeing my daughter perform in a local dance production of The Grinch. And, yes, I can see a comparison of this fuzzy green grumpy Grinch to the pandemic.

Typically, we count the days until Christmas with a whole lot of holiday season hustle and bustle. But in the past few months, as our world sheltered at home, we unexpectedly had to slow down... *watching and waiting*. Now we begin Advent -- a traditional time for *watching and waiting* -- during a Grinch-y Pandemic. Some of us have tentatively come out of our homes, some of us have not. Either way, we yearn for time together... not unlike the *Who's down in Whoville*. Cindy Lou Who reminds us "*No matter how different a Who may appear, he will always be welcome with holiday cheer.*" Thus, this Advent Devotional was created as a welcome into our church family "homes" ... a welcome to visit **Home to Home** as we are **Watching & Waiting** through Advent.

What are the lessons we learn from the Grinch as he tries to steal Christmas? As the story recites.... *And what happened then? Well, in Whoville they say, that the Grinch's small heart grew three sizes that day. And then the true meaning of Christmas came through, and the Grinch found the strength of ten Grinches plus two!* The same is true with this Advent Devotional... the true meaning of Christmas comes through as a variety of our church members share their stories.

Within these Advent 2020 writings, you will witness that Christmas is coming in spite of the Grinch-y Pandemic. You will witness **HOPE** in the many ways we find to serve others and greet each morning with renewed faith; you will witness **PEACE** as we reflect on cherished memories, treasure quiet times and focus on the flickering light of Christ shining in the darkness; you will witness **JOY** as we appreciate less busyness and more family time as we delight in the “little things” like Christmas lights, trains around our tree, reading books from our childhood, songs of Christmas, long walks and bike rides, and unexpected surprises; and you will witness **LOVE** that grows *three sizes* bigger as we count our blessings and behold amazing love all around us.

Most of all, you will witness that this Grinch-y Pandemic is NOT stealing Christmas!

Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before! ...Maybe Christmas perhaps.... means a little bit more!

Yes, you will find through these pages, it definitely means more.

May you and your family be surrounded by HOPE, PEACE, JOY & LOVE as you visit ***Home to Home: Watching & Waiting.***

NOVEMBER 29 ~ FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

THE CANDLE OF HOPE

ADVENT WREATH ~ LIGHT THE FIRST PURPLE CANDLE AND REFLECT ON WHAT BRINGS YOU HOPE.

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

Isaiah 40:28-31 (NIV)

WRITTEN BY MARGARET BRITT IN 1994

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught

up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore, encourage one another with these words."

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

1917 Christmas

Many things have changed since 1917 in Paw Creek, North Carolina. The family farm where I grew up is now a fashionable development and the creek and spring that fed it are a part of a lake that covers much of my Daddy's cotton and corn fields. Yes, *change in all around I see*, but in my treasure of happy memories, there is Christmas 1917 that blots out all the change! Although I was only seven years old, I recall it well for it was the last time all my family celebrated Christmas together. My big sister, Leoma, sixteen years old, died before Christmas 1918.

There were great preparations: Mama's cooking, helping Daddy find the perfect tree, Leoma making ropes of popcorn and red berries for the tree, greenery from the woods that gave the house a special fragrance, and finally the arrival of my two older brothers and sister with their young children. There was great joy in the Todd family that Christmas Eve!

By five o'clock Christmas morning, my Daddy had a roaring fire going in the front room, the Aladdin lamp was lit as well as the little candles clamped to the tree branches. I remember only one thing about presents, the doll I had asked for but did not expect that she would be sitting in a small replica of the then popular yard swing!

As daylight began to break, my Daddy who loved to sing with us, had us all gather around the piano to sing the Christmas story --- from beginning to end! This is the most precious part of my Paw Creek memories!

Dear to my heart is the promise in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 of heaven, a place of reunion. How comforting to know that one day I will join those "I have loved and lost awhile" and that we will join with all that great family of God to sing our "Hallelujahs!"

Let us pray...

As Christmas comes again, come with it Lord Jesus, and make a new entrance into our hearts. Help us to appreciate the true meaning of Christmas and to enjoy, with those we love, the festive season in a spirit and manner that reflects love, praise and honor to you, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

NOVEMBER 30

WRITTEN BY KATE BUCKLEY (WITH STUART, EJ, EVIE & BEN)

My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

2 Corinthians 12:9

One of the favorite books at our house is called “The Gift of Nothing” by Patrick McDonnell. In its pages, Mooch thinks and thinks of something to get for his friend, Earl, who has everything. What do you get for someone who has everything? Ah! Nothing!!! So he looks high and low, at all the stores, and no matter how hard he looks he can’t find *nothing*. He sees many somethings for sale, but nothing is just not for sale. So he wraps up a big old box and with huge joy he gifts it to his best friend, Earl. Earl opens the empty box and is confused at first. But soon they settle into deep contentment, sitting together. Friends side by side in silence looking up at the stars. They had nothing. And they had everything.

The older I get, the more I realize how backwards faith is. It’s all upside down – like the beatitudes. It’s counterintuitive, this faith thing. Every single day the poignant and powerful are woven into all of life: the good and bad, the ups and downs, the ecstatic adventures and the hauntingly upsetting. Our faith finds God in a feed trough. Our faith views pain as an empty place, simultaneously barren and fertile, like that tomb in Jerusalem. Our faith assures us that even when (and maybe even because) we are surrounded by darkness and suffering, we draw ever closer to the God that never leaves us. Unbelievably and blessedly, hope and new life await. The seasons leading up to Christmas and to Easter, the “big days” of our Christian faith, are intentionally filled with waiting. Specifically, waiting in the dark.

Unlike most of the world that is used to scurrying at Mach 8 speed, Christians carve out time during both Advent and Lent to sit. In darkness and in reflection. These are periods of emptying out all the extra – extra that if it sits with us long enough threatens to become something we “need.” All of the stuff that really does not matter. Twice a year, we slow down and intentionally come to God with open eyes and open hearts. We wait for Jesus’ coming during Advent and for Jesus’ saving death and rising during Lent with a prayer. A prayer for willingness, the willingness to toss the extra somethings that get in the way of the nothing that turns out to be everything.

Let us pray...

Lord, help me to welcome the dark. It is there where I wait and feel you close. It is there where I see your Light more clearly. It is there where the nothing turns out to be everything. Amen.

DECEMBER 1

WRITTEN BY BAIN HEAD (WITH BRADY & KATE)

For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on his shoulders. And he will be called: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His government and its peace will never end. He will rule with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David for all eternity. The passionate commitment of the Lord of Heaven's Armies will make this happen.

Isaiah 9: 6 -7 (NLT)

We cannot read these verses without the melody of Handel's Messiah playing in our heads and can hardly read them aloud without singing them. The Messiah Sing-Along at our church in Houston has long marked the beginning of the advent season for us, followed soon after by fervent decorating of the house and yard, social gatherings, school programs and frenzied gift shopping. Each year the first decoration that comes out in our home is an Advent display, a plate with pillar candles surrounded by dried beans, nuts and cranberries. As we light the candle of Hope, its flickering flame reminds us of the sure promise of Jesus, the light of the world, sent to those living in darkness.

This year's Christmas season is sure to be a different one for our family as Covid has impacted the way in which we go about and experience so many things. Our historical traditions are sure to be disrupted. Will the weather hold for outdoor live SSPC Advent and Christmas worship services? Will we be able to travel to Houston to see family? Will family travel here to see us? How many might gather around the dinner table or in the living room to exchange gifts?

Yet, perhaps this is one of the blessings of the pandemic - a Christmas season to focus not on our traditions but the true light which shines brilliantly into our current darkness? The perfect gift from God. For it is in our darkest times that we cling to the hope that can be found only in Jesus, God's promised Messiah: the certain hope of ultimate and eternal restoration and redemption of each of us and all of His creation.

Isaiah's prophetic words of hope, the promise of justice and righteousness forever, were originally directed to the people of Judah, Israel and the surrounding pagan nations many

hundreds of years before the birth of Christ. How much more hopeful are they for us who recognize the prophecy fulfilled in Jesus, the promised Messiah?

This Christmas, *“may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Romans 15:13*

Let us pray....

Mighty God, we look to you to light our way in these uncertain and challenging times. We find comfort in the prophets’ words of hope. As we celebrate the Advent season with song and candle light, we feel the warmth of your love in our hearts. Amen.

DECEMBER 2

WRITTEN BY FAYE HARDIMAN (WITH JERRY)

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God . . . In Him was life, and that life was the light of mankind. John 1:1, 4

2020 has been a year of changes for us. We've moved to a new location, started meeting new people, and joining in new activities. We've also, as everyone else has, been dealing with the disruptions that COVID-19 has brought. Our family is changing, too. Grandchildren are growing up, getting married, going to college, and graduating from high school. How our family gets together is not as predictable as it once was.

So, as we approach this Advent season, we look with thankfulness on what does not change—God's grace and love demonstrated in the gift of His Son as our Savior. Advent reminds us day by day of the waiting of Mary and Joseph, the heralding of the angels, and the worshipping of the shepherds and Wise Men for the birth of this child and a gift that would transform those who accepted it. This timeless story gives us hope and peace in a new year, joy in daily living, and love to share.

Let us pray...

Our Father and Giver of all gifts, we thank you and ask that we may accept the gift of Jesus' life with the joy that greeted him at his birth and share the hope, peace, and love it brings with us into a new year. In His name, Amen.

DECEMBER 3

WRITTEN BY CARRIE WESSEL (WITH TADD, CAROLINA, JOHN CANNON & SARAH)

*The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.*

*"The Lord is my portion," says my soul,
"therefore, I will hope in him."* Lamentations 3:22-24

Christmas morning last year, 2019, we sat in our backyard and watched a beautiful sunrise. We captured this stunning start to our day with a photo that we cherish. It's a family favorite for several reasons but has been particularly meaningful this past year, as we've spent more mornings than most in our home, quietly watching the sunrise. And every morning the sun slowly appears, sometimes a majestic red ball of fire, as seen in our beloved photo, sometimes a hazy film of light, but it is always there. It is something we can depend on day after day. To our family, hope is having faith, knowing in our heart, that whatever upsetting and sad news the pandemic and state of our world will bring that morning, the beautiful sun will rise. In the same way, we have hope knowing, in our heart, that each year we can celebrate the birth and arrival of our savior, Jesus Christ. When the sun rises this Christmas morning, we will once again have hope knowing the birth of Jesus on this Earth can bring salvation for all.

"Without Christ, there is no hope."

WRITTEN BY CAROLINA WESSEL (AGE 14)

Advent Poem

Like Fireflies in the dark, God's goodness surrounds us

For in dark we are surrounded by fireflies

We might not always see them

but every now and then they will flicker and their light will be shown

WRITTEN BY JOHN CANNON WESSEL (AGE 11)

Advent is a time of joy and love. If there is a time full of sorrow, how do you find love or joy in it? The answer is by greeting people and being kind and loving. We can meet people and fill their and our hearts with joy.

If there is a time of uncertainty, how would you find love? You can find love by being loving and nice and giving things to others that really need them. If there is a time of horrible things, how will you find God in it? By praying and going to church or things that bring you closer to God.

Advent is a time of importance; it is a time to always be remembered (which it is). There are many other things like having fun and worshipping God. What if you were waiting for Christ's birthday and you took so much time to prepare for the birth of him. You would definitely be excited and could not wait. What if? What if?

Our family will experience advent by setting up Advent and Christmas decorations. We will set up our Christmas tree. We do have a family tradition. It is FaceTiming our family around Christmas time and bringing the large Christmas boxes down from the attic for decorations. We also usually get a bigger Christmas tree every year. We read our favorite Christmas stories, especially from the Bible. We will go to church and meet other people and say hi to them because we know them.

The challenges of the pandemic have definitely changed the way we live and affect our time of Advent because we are unable to spend time with people to spread the joy. It will definitely be different, but at least we get to celebrate. There is also a thing that I would like to begin this Advent doing: I would like to donate things to Sparrows Nest or Safe Harbor. We can draw drawings to use as decorations too. I think this Advent will be a-okay.

Let us pray...

God of the morning sun and flickering fireflies, we are amazed by your love. We are reminded of your grace every new morning. Even in our darkest days, your light gives us hope. Great is our faith in you! Amen.

DECEMBER 4

WRITTEN BY JOHN MATTHEWS

Shout for joy to God, all the earth!

Sing the glory of his name; make his praise glorious.

Psalm 66:1-2

As a little boy, one of the fond remembrances I have of the Christmas Advent season is of the wax figurine Choir my mother had proudly displayed on the mantle, usually interspersed with some small pine boughs. The Choir Director stood proudly in front of the choir, ready to joyfully sing the songs of the season and praises to God for the gift of His son. I have heard, but do not know, that these figurines, actually candles, are a World War II vintage, as the wax used to create them was not required for the war effort. When my mother broke up housekeeping, these figurines and some wax tree ornaments were things I asked to have.

Nancy has done me the honor of displaying these items on our mantle every year. There is something very sentimental, but even more satisfying in seeing this display from my youth year after year. The certainty of the choir appearing every year reminds me of the certainty of the arrival of the Christ Child and the certainty of God's love for us, celebrated every year. While the Covid 19 pandemic has changed a lot of things in our lives, the certainty of Christ's coming, tangibly expressing God's love for us by sending us a Savior cannot and will not change, no matter what trials we may face, now and in the future.

WRITTEN BY NANCY MATTHEWS

What Hope Looks Like

I grew up on a farm in Ohio and each Christmas Eve, Dad did something we thought was odd. Now Dad was not a religious person and didn't attend church. During his childhood, however, he heard the old northern European story about the animals talking at midnight, Christmas Eve. All throughout our childhood, though we were tucked in but too excited to sleep, we'd hear Dad tell Mom he was going out to the barn to check on the animals right around midnight. We had cows, chickens, pigs, and sheep. He never did this any other night of the year.

Over the years, long after I had the chance to ask him, I figured he was demonstrating hope, the belief that some sign of the miracle of Christ's birth would be manifested in our farm animals. He never missed a year yet still believed it was possible to witness all Creation rejoicing at the birth of the Savior of the world.

Let us pray....

Lord, we sing praise to you as we watch and wait for the miracle of Christmas morning! Your everlasting love for us fills our hearts with hope and gratitude. Amen.

DECEMBER 5

WRITTEN BY KASHEY ODUM

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. John 1:5

Each year at Christmas my daughter and I would read 'The Little Match Girl' by Hans Christian Anderson (written in 1846). Here are parts of the story....

*It was terribly cold and nearly dark
on the last evening of the old year,
and the snow was falling fast.
In the cold and the darkness,
a poor little girl, with bare head and naked feet,
roamed through the streets...*

*In an old apron she carried a number of matches,
and had a bundle of them in her hands.
No one had bought anything of her the whole day,
nor had anyone given her even a penny.
Shivering with cold and hunger, she crept along;
poor little child, she looked the picture of misery.*

*Ah! perhaps a burning match might be some good,
if she could draw it from the bundle and strike it against the wall,
just to warm her fingers.
She drew one out—“scratch!” how it sputtered as it burnt!
It gave a warm, bright light, like a little candle, as she held her hand over it.
It was really a wonderful light.
It seemed to the little girl that she was sitting by a large iron stove, with polished brass feet*

and a brass ornament.

How the fire burned!

and seemed so beautifully warm that the child stretched out her feet as if to warm them, when, lo! the flame of the match went out, and the stove vanished...

She rubbed another match on the wall.

It burst into a flame...and she could see into the room.

The table was covered with a snowy white table-cloth, on which stood a splendid dinner service,

and a steaming roast goose, stuffed with apples and dried plums....

Then the match went out, and there remained nothing but the thick, damp, cold wall before her.

She lighted another match, and then she found herself sitting under a beautiful Christmas-tree...

Thousands of tapers were burning upon the green branches...

The little one stretched out her hand towards them, and the match went out.

Then she saw a star fall, leaving behind it a bright streak of fire. "Someone is dying," thought the little girl, for her old grandmother, the only one who had ever loved her, and who was now dead, had told her that when a star falls, a soul was going up to God.

She again rubbed a match on the wall, and the light shone round her; in the brightness stood her old grandmother, clear and shining, yet mild and loving in her appearance.

"Grandmother," cried the little one, "O take me with you;

I know you will go away when the match burns out;

you will vanish like the warm stove, the roast goose, and the large, glorious Christmas-tree."

And she made haste to light the whole bundle of matches, for she wished to keep her grandmother there.

And the matches glowed with a light that was brighter than the noon-day, and her grandmother had never appeared so large or so beautiful.

She took the little girl in her arms,

and they both flew upwards in brightness and joy far above the earth, where there was neither cold nor hunger nor pain, for they were with God.

In the dawn of morning there lay the poor little one...

"She tried to warm herself," said some.

No one imagined what beautiful things she had seen, nor into what glory she had entered with her grandmother, on New-year's day.

What a sad but beautiful little story! We would cry for her, for we had so much and she had nothing. So here we are in Advent 2020... and even in a pandemic, we still have many blessings. May we remember even through the darkness, there is a *wonderful light* keeping us *beautifully warm* and giving us hope.

Let us pray...

Thank you, Lord, for our many blessings. We are most thankful for the brightness and joy your Son, Jesus, brings to our lives. Help us to find ways we can be the light and hope to others. Amen.

DECEMBER 6 ~ SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

THE CANDLE OF PEACE

ADVENT WREATH ~ LIGHT TWO PURPLE CANDLES AND REFLECT ON WHERE YOU SEE PEACE.

“Do you now believe?” Jesus replied. “A time is coming and in fact has come when you will be scattered, each to your own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me.

“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

John 16:31-33

WRITTEN BY MEG WAY IN 1994

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!” Luke 2:13-14

In this time of anger, terrorism, political battles, sadistic crimes and substance abuse, can we, without hypocrisy, “celebrate” Christmas? Dare we sing “peace on earth” or hope for “good will towards men and women?” Have we the heart, wisdom, and faith to listen for carols above the sounds of gunfire, to look for the Star in our polluted skies, or to trust in the tranquility of the manger message in the midst of terror?

We can! We must! There is no other way!

For Christmas does not depend on us for “celebration.” If every choir and church bell were silent; if no gifts were tied with ribbon; if there were no family reunions, no Salvation Army kettles, or poinsettias, or parties; if there were no carols or songs of praise, there would still be Christmas.

In the radiant light of the Star, the gentle glory of the Bethlehem manger, and the glorious songs of angels lies our only hope for the “peace on earth” and “goodwill to men” for which our human hearts hunger.

Without the peace that is Christmas, we cannot hope to stop murders and wars. Without the truth that is Christmas, we cannot learn to trust each other. Without the love that is Christmas, we cannot find harmony. Without the life that is Christmas, we cannot continue to live abundantly. Can we, without hypocrisy, “celebrate” Christmas?

We can! We must! There is no other way!

Let us pray...

Thank you, Lord, for the privilege and the opportunity to “celebrate” Christmas. For you loved us so much that you sent your Son into the world to bring love, peace and good will. Help us always to be responsive to your love so that we may become channels for reaching others. Amen.

DECEMBER 7

WRITTEN BY ADA OWENS (WITH GRAHAM, ARTHUR, ANSEL & ASA)

*You, Lord, keep my lamp burning;
my God turns my darkness into light. Psalm 18:28*

The season of Advent can so easily be diluted with the hustle & bustle that accompanies the weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas. There's always a party to attend, a gift to buy, a card to mail and a meal to make. The kids are either on their very best behavior (for fear of being crossed off Santa's list) or they're screaming their own lists of "I wants" while we're trying to tuck them into bed and settle down for the night. It can be overwhelming, but there is also an opportunity in this season for teaching, learning, and practicing traditions, old and new.

As a child, my greatest memory of Advent has always been the candles. The warm light that would grow in numbers every week and the deep purple and then pink wax that would drip down the candles, spilling onto the decorated wreath below. On Christmas Eve my parents would put us to bed in our best pajamas, only to wake us a few hours later for midnight mass at our small Episcopal church in Moultrie, GA. My brother and I would count the number of new faces filling the pews and, much like counting sheep, the rhythm and

monotony would help us drift back to sleep during the early morning worship... until it was time to light the Christ candle. That single white candle that was reserved for Christmas morning and would complete the circle of lights in celebration of His holy birth.

The traditions we're creating with our three young boys have already carved a path in our hearts. Advent Festival at SSPRES brings so much excitement in our home, and I adore the time we spend together with our children and church family crafting treasures that will decorate our home for years to come. And then there are the candles. The four colorful candles that circle around a single white flame, come Christmas Eve. It seems I've passed my advent candle excitement down to my children and it has now expanded with a new stage in the process; Lighting the Advent candle at Worship together, as a family. It doesn't happen every year, as there are only four candles and many SSPC families who share in this tradition with us, but that only makes it more special. Those flames are a warm reminder of what's to come. The true purpose in this busy season and a love to celebrate daily. The inspiration for these treasured family traditions and the greatest gift of all, the birth of our savior and king, Jesus Christ. I pray the flames touch each of your hearts this season, just as they will our own. Happy Advent season to our beloved congregation at St. Simons Presbyterian!

Let us pray...

God of Light! You warm our hearts with your love and grace. Help us to keep you in the center of our lives as we soak in this Advent season. Light our way, and guide our feet... be they big or small. Amen.

DECEMBER 8

WRITTEN BY ANN MARIE MORRISON

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

In my freshman year of college, a friend told me that his favorite part of Christmas was the stillness—no one worked, stores were closed, and everyone gathered in churches to be still together.

I ruined that image for him.

For seven years prior to that conversation, I worked Christmas at Saint Simons Presbyterian Church. This started out simply ringing in Christmas at the late Christmas Eve service but grew into playing my clarinet for the choir cantata and singing Gesu Bambino at both Christmas Eve services. Christmas was a time of busy-ness and business. For my friend, who did not grow up heavily involved in a church, my activity was a shock. That perfectly still moment he loved was in fact practiced and perfected so that we—musicians and clergy—could help deliver to you the gift of peace. For us, Christmas is a time of movement.

I dearly love this movement. It is a joy to be a part of your worship. But what I didn't tell my friend was that my favorite part was also the stillness. After I'd rung and played and sung, I would sit in our chancel, usually out of sight of the congregation for the first time in weeks, and wait for Rhonda Hambright to sing:

Fall on your knees. Oh, hear the angels' voices...

Do you know what happens when you're on your knees? You are still. And in stillness, we can listen.

This Advent, I will probably not hear Rhonda sing those words, but I will carry their peace with me. While I hustle about to help bring peace to you—I'm currently the girl who runs the livestream and helps set up Frederica's sound for our in-person worship—I will also stop. I will fall on my knees. I invite you to do so as well.

Oh, night divine! Oh, night, when Christ was born!

Let us pray....

Lord of stillness, you bring me comfort and peace. Quiet my heart as I wait in awe to welcome our Savior into the world. During this season of busyness, help me to stop and listen, not only to hear the “angels voices” but to hear the peaceful silence. Amen.

DECEMBER 9

WRITTEN BY DENNIE MCCRARY

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

We expect to spend this Advent, this celebration of Christ's comings, both first and future, with hope, peace, joy and love. But it will be different this year. We will be at home with only a couple of our immediate family members. A positive of this will be more time to reflect on what Advent is all about, and about past celebrations!

My earliest memories are of the reading and memorizing of "the Christmas story" in Luke 2:8-16, followed by prayers with my Mother, Grandmother, sister and perhaps an aunt, uncle and a few cousins at home, doing the same thing in Sunday School, and, beginning in the first grade regularly at grade school as well.

Beginning early on, I have always had the opportunity to attend live nativity scenes too! And the celebrations have always included Christmas trees, gifts and big dinners.

I have been fortunate every year of my life to be with family, most of the time including large extended family even when in the military service. I know many do not have this opportunity, privilege, pleasure. And many do not have Christmas trees, gifts or big dinners.

I have read, or had read to me, many wonderful stories about this season, some very sad. The first real book I remember ever being read to me was by my Grandmother, and it was **Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch** (published in 1901), full of peace, joy, hope, love, but also great sadness. This charming, funny, best-selling book chronicles hope over despair of a struggling family in a Kentucky slum. Mrs. Wiggs philosophy is spelled out on the first page... "In the mud and scum of things, something always, always sings!"

In recent years, I have read Henri Nouwen and C.S. Lewis writings on Advent which I picked up at our church. I attempted to summarize them for my family at the time and some of my favorite reflections are listed here.

Henri Nouwen on Advent (from my notes in 2011)

~Be alert so that you can recognize your Lord in your family, friends, teachers and in all you read.

~Have eyes for God in small things.

~Pray, allow God to do something thru you today.

~Jesus, help me to keep listening for you in the stillness of my heart.

~Celebration is one of the core words of the Christian life. Celebration lifts up not only the happy moments but the sad as well. We cannot do it alone.

C.S. Lewis on Advent (from my notes in 2013)

~ When I am reluctant to share my faith with others, Lord, remind me that someone once shared their faith with me.

~ Draw me into the circle of your people, so that I may, through and with them, grow close to you.

~ Help me see the world as you do that I can play a part in making things better.

~Lord Jesus, remind me that you are close to me and listen to my prayers, whether I am aware of it or not.

~Stir in me a deep desire for prayer so that I may make time for you in the business of each day.

~Help me to remember you are here again right now, always in our midst.

Again, a positive of most all of our circumstances this Advent season will be more time to reflect---and pray ahead.

Let us pray....

Heavenly Father, we are thankful for the moments of peaceful reflection. Help us to listen for you in the stillness of our hearts. Lead us in ways to share your love and your grace with the world around us. Amen.

DECEMBER 10

WRITTEN BY ANNA HENRY

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Colossians 3:15

I was looking forward to the fact that my very large Davis Family was going to gather with me on Thanksgiving this year, since we could not have our 4th July "Pig Pickin'" on St. Simons Island. This event is never just one day, we still think it's fun to have people sleeping all over the house. Long ago a cousin remarked "There's always someone to talk with if you wake up in the middle of the night!" As in most families, there is great diversity. We have been fortunate because when this event began in 1946 Big Mama & Big Papa set the tone, encouraging their nine children to agree to disagree with love for one another. Everyone was always ready for lively discussions involving religion, politics and even sex! This still holds true today with their many descendants! I'm going to miss this!

We won't be lighting up my big outdoor cooking pit this year. This year calls for Zooming! I'm proposing that we share lighting Advent Candles instead! Zooming together with a different cousin's family each Sunday lighting the candles for Hope, Love, Joy & Peace. I'm requesting Peace Sunday for myself. I like to walk on the beach as this takes me away from the many available distractions. Whether there's a roaring northeaster or an ocean as calm as a lake, this is my time for reflection and prayer. In prayer at the beach I always find Hope, Love, and Joy which lead to Peace.

Lighting the Peace candle this year, I will be praying for Peace, especially in our Nation and in the world at large. Let us all pray "*Let it begin with me*".

Peace!

Let us pray...

Creator God! I look for you in the wails and the whispers. Keep my eyes on you and peace in my heart. I am thankful for creative ways to keep us connected even when things are trying to keep us apart. And, Lord, let peace begin with me. Amen.

DECEMBER 11

WRITTEN BY DAVIS LOVE III (WITH ROBIN)

Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives. Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom he gives. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts. Colossians 3:16

Advent for me has always been a season of anticipation and excitement. A fun time of preparation and being busy gathering food, family and gifts. But also a dilemma of being consumed with the things of Christmas and not the Christmas story. Always looking to give the perfect gift while trying not to be selfish and wishing for a gift.

So how can I make this Advent season mean more to my family and friends than the month between being thankful and opening presents? I often remember my Dad enjoying the move my Mom led to SSPC because of the traditional liturgical worship. He liked to be organized and have a plan!

I was sent these verses for the Sunday we wrapped up the RSM classic week by our PGA Tour Chaplain,

“This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

Psalm 118:24 ESV

“I am overwhelmed with joy in the Lord my God! For he has dressed me with the clothing of salvation and draped me in a robe of righteousness. ”

Isaiah 61:10a NLT

“I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow!”

John 15:11 NLT

So my plan for the Advent season is to not put my hope in Christmas present Joy, or wishing for the craziness of 2020 to be over, but give thanks for continued blessings that only come from the true meaning of Christmas, and pray daily for what the advent wreath symbolizes. The Love Christmas will carry on old traditions like a big train entertaining little ones (and me!), as it goes round and round the tree. Similarly, our faith encircles the Christ Child filling our new home with Hope Love Joy and Peace!

Let us pray...

Lord, we are a grateful people. Thank you for filling our lives with Christ Jesus. Thank you for filling our lives with joy. Thank you for filling our lives with friends and family that point us to the true meaning of Christmas and bring us peace. Amen.

DECEMBER 12

WRITTEN BY JEFF ROBERTS (WITH COURTNEY & LILY)

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives.

Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. John 14:2

As they say in certain military and other operational circles, here's the BLUF---Bottom Line Up Front---I don't see the world the same way as I did this time last Advent Season. I don't see much of anything the same way I did when compared to the world we live in with the COVID pandemic. My family and I are beyond lucky-- you see I struggle mightily with the term blessed in this context. We are undoubtedly blessed, long before this of course. We have our health-- no scares so far, no loss of employment, no cut in salary; none of the life events that bring a cold chill to your body, a dizziness in your vision and other feelings that so many, many people are going through and will continue to go through for who knows how long. I don't know how to address these events that I am seeing first hand now affecting my co-workers, my friends, extended family and played out in the country and world on an hourly basis. For some it has changed their world forever. For one family I know, they have been hit with the deaths of several close family members, tremendous financial strain and at least as viewed from the outside, very few things to be happy about. Yet, although there is their acknowledgement of this incredibly difficult time, these friends of mine and many more just like them, are finding ways to see the light in the dark, feel hope for the future and wait for a brighter tomorrow and the very real excitement in anticipation of the birth of our Lord!

It is easy to focus on what this year has taken rather than many things it has given. 2020 has given us plenty. For example, my family added walks each night this Spring through the late Fall. I for one, cannot recall a more beautiful and pleasant Spring and early Summer and I got to spend it with the people I care about most. It took some getting used to but I wouldn't trade those walks, sharing virtual school lessons, mid day bike rides and eating Every. Single. Meal. Together. For anything!

In our interrupted routines-- the cancelled vacations, the virtual school calendar, the change in work flow-less then more than any time in my career, we discovered the world is much smaller than it had been previously. I watched our church come up with incredible ways to help the community, large and small. I saw people, even while socially distanced and many times scared for their own safety, reach out to others to share time together and make the most of a difficult situation. Those connections saved lives.

As we start the Advent Season, we will not be able to do any of our family traditions, like traveling and gathering with family and friends, this year. But what we can do is focus on each other, to be the hands and feet of Christ, to welcome the birth of Jesus more personally than we ever have done previously. We can read our Scriptures, we can put ourselves more soundly in the events of His birth. We can truly cherish each other and our friends and family, anyway we can.

The pandemic will eventually be over and we can either focus our memory on the pain and suffering and disruptions it caused or we can remember what we learned of ourselves, of our reset of priorities and our perseverance and dedication in being the people we have been called to be as Christians.

This pandemic has shown that each of us has the opportunity to be a beacon of hope to others. To love each other and our community and that while our world has been made much smaller, our Lord is much larger and we celebrate the wait this year, perhaps differently, but in greater anticipation than ever before.

May your Advent Season bring health, Joy and Peace,

Let us pray...

Gracious Lord, we welcome the birth of your Son, Jesus, the Prince of Peace. As we see the world struggle with unexpected challenges, make us instruments of your peace. Help us spread joy where there is despair. Help us spread love to those who are hurting. We are forever grateful and put our hope in you. Amen.

DECEMBER 13 ~ THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

THE CANDLE OF JOY

ADVENT WREATH ~ LIGHT TWO PURPLE CANDLES AND THE PINK CANDLE AND REFLECT ON WHERE YOU FIND JOY?

But let all who take refuge in you be glad; let them ever sing for joy. Spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may rejoice in you.

Psalms 5:11

WRITTEN BY MIKE HARRY IN 2001 (WITH KAREN, BETH, RENA, MICHAEL, MEG, ROB AND JOHN)

He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth.

Luke 1:14

It just happened. Our new tradition began as an assortment of nutcrackers. As you know, we have a large, non-traditional family. This can be very challenging for all because some holidays we are together and others we are separated. Each year we seem to create new and different memories. One year each child received a nutcracker as a gift. As you visit our house, just look in their rooms and you will find them.

Throughout our five years together, we have had a few nuts to crack. What we discovered when we looked inside was very interesting. Nuts and nutcrackers come in all shapes and sizes, each one with its own personality. Sometimes we crack up over the silly things we have done. Sometimes we act like rotten nuts and do not treat each other so kindly. Whether hard shell or soft shell, we have cracked them all to form a wonderful union. We are a mixed bag of nuts. We try to be a family of distinction. Each of us has unique gifts to offer each other. Over the five years we have been together, we have grown to love each other as special individuals with colorful traits and meaningful personalities.

Carefully crafted in the image of God, we are truly blessed. We can display our collection of masterpieces with pride and humility. Who knows what kind of nutcrackers we will receive as gifts this year?

Let us pray...

Father God, bless our families, our loved ones and our friends during this joyous time of year. We pray that the loving spirit of Christmas will enter every home and be a blessing to all. Lord, give us the strength to be patient, kind and forgiving in all our encounters. Amen.

DECEMBER 14

WRITTEN BY MEG JOHNSON MIMBS (WITH TYLER)

The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.

John 1:4-5

“Stinky coronavirus.” My 2nd grade students know this phrase well. It’s become our go-to every time we encounter a changed plan or a difficult obstacle presented by our new “COVID” norms. If we stomp our foot and say it in a silly voice, it helps turn the frustration into a giggle. A sigh and a giggle...I think that sums up one of the greatest lessons of 2020 for me. The reminder that despair and joy come together. There’s a song lyric by a musical group named Rend Collective that says, “The dark is just a canvas for Your grace and brightness.” I have needed to hear those words A LOT this year.

The perfectionist in me wants to be able to look back one day and tell my children and grandchildren, “2020 was hard, but I had perfect faith the whole time.” But I won’t be able to say that...because I haven’t. I haven’t been hopeful and calm and joyous the whole time. There have been some dark moments – around the world, across our nation, and inside of me.

You know what I *will* be able to say, though? God was still good, even when I wasn't. And He still loved us perfectly the *whole* time, even when I forgot it. I'm realizing that that's better. And you know what I'll remember? I'll remember the despair – I can't lie. I think we are called to remember it. But I'll also remember the joy. I'll remember the beauty enjoyed in nature (even if it was to escape reality). I'll remember *amazing* people loving *really* well (even if it was in response to a crisis). I'll remember resilient students and the strength of co-workers (even though we all had our breaking points). I'll remember picnics in the living room and laughing with Tyler (even when I wanted to cry). I'll remember our family being wonderful (even though we had our conflicts). And I'll remember the moments when Jesus showed up (because I just couldn't do it myself).

So, as we walk through Advent this year, in all of its 2020 messiness, I can't help but find the despair woven throughout the Christmas story. I hear the weary sigh of a Father looking down at His broken and hurting world – a world in need of saving. I see worry in the face of a mother, looking down at her infant son, coming to terms with the gravity of the job set before him. I feel the anxiety of a parent, forced to flee with his family in order to keep them safe. But I find that remembering these things doesn't lessen the joy of the story for me; remembering the despair reminds me what an immeasurable and indescribable gift the Christ child really is. The sound of the shepherds singing, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, is even *more* beautiful. The sight of a shining star, lighting the way in the darkness for all who choose to follow, is even *more* comforting. And the feeling of peace, heralded by an angel chorus, is even *more* miraculous. Against a backdrop of despair, joy simply means...*more*.

Let us pray...

*Thank you, Lord, for the joy of Christmas that is gifted to a despairing world. Thank you for the things that You teach us through both the sighs and the giggles. Thank you for being Emmanuel, God who is **still** with us. Amen.*

DECEMBER 15

WRITTEN BY GREER ANDERSON (WITH MOBLEY GRACE, AGE 7)

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

Philippians 4:4

At the beginning of every year, I'm always filled with lots of ideas that I want to make a part of the next twelve months. Resolutions, plans, goals. Like most people, those are long forgotten by mid-February. There is one thing though that Mobley Grace and I started two years ago (can we call that a tradition?) that we've been happy to keep. Our Joy Jar.

Our jar is a simple Ball canning jar that Mobley Grace decorated at school or church – neither one of us can remember. It lives on our kitchen counter amidst the mail, school papers, cookbooks and clutter. During the year we remind each other to stop and write down the things that make us happy and bring us joy. This may only happen once or twice a month but when it does we get so excited we take time to think of all that has happened. We tear up tiny slips of paper, use colorful, glittery gel pens and write down our joys. These are usually everyday things like: a bike ride, Tee Dog, or our cat Boomerang. Then we take those joys, fold them up and place them in the jar.

This year, these little notes have taken on a bigger meaning. With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic we had more time to spend together and more “little things” to enjoy. All of the sudden we had more “joys” going in the Joy Jar. Sidewalk Chalk. Lunch on the porch on a Tuesday. Long walks with Tee Dog. Zoom calls with Uncle Brown and Uncle Bruce. Pen Pal letters from our “Presby Pal.” In a time when we felt so disconnected and knocked out of our routine we were able to find joy.

During the month of December we take out one joy a day and read it to remind each other of all the happiness and blessings we've enjoyed over the year. During this Advent season we'll be able to look at these joys with a new sense of appreciation while we wait on the greatest blessing of all. The birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Let us pray...

God of Joy! We are so thankful that you bring a smile to our face even when we feel disconnected from our normal. Open our eyes to all the little things that really matter.

Remind us of our countless blessings and overflowing joy! We rejoice in you always! Amen.

DECEMBER 16

WRITTEN BY STUART BUCKLEY (WITH KATE, EJ, EVIE & BEN)

My heart rejoices in the Lord; in the Lord my horn is lifted high...

1 Samuel 2:1

Growing up, some of my favorite Christmas memories involve “driving around.” The five of us would pack in the car and ride around suburban Roswell, GA looking for Christmas lights. In hindsight, this was odd because we hardly decorated ourselves – just a Christmas tree visible through a window, a door wreath, and some of those fake candles that caught all those houses on fire in the 90’s. We listened to Christmas music on Fox 97 and cruised around, looking for the good stuff. Looking for the Roswell equivalent of that annual atrocity in Sea Palms.

What we were really doing, I now realize, was giving my mother the opportunity to validate her simple (yet sophisticated) Southern taste and unashamedly judge all the tasteless Yankees with inflatables and colored lights. One night, having heard enough criticizing, my dad snapped a little. He began laying on the horn as we drove by a well-lit house yelling “TACKY” at the top of his lungs. My brothers and I laughed until we cried and this became an annual tradition.

The hunt for tacky Christmas is not something the pandemic can take away from us, and I’m looking forward to packing the kids in the car this year. To date, I have not laid on the horn. But I’m told we all become our parents, so I’m not making any promises...

Let us pray...

Lord, we are thankful for all our joys ... the big and the small, the meaningful and the silly, the expected and the unexpected. Our hearts rejoice in you! Amen.

DECEMBER 17

WRITTEN BY RON BINKNEY

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. Luke 2:7

“Let’s do something different,” one of us in the Senior High Youth Group said. That singular challenge was all it took for our youth group at church to embark on a Christmas activity that has been faithfully replicated now for more than five decades!

The *spirit of giving*, especially during the Christmas season at St. Simons Presbyterian Church, has always been a hallmark. But, the *spirit of giving* seemed to shine on our church as bright as the Star of David during a memorable time in the early 1960s.

Shortly after Thanksgiving in 1963, one of the Sunday evening youth group adult leaders (probably Floyd or Jeannette Diephius) called to our attention that as the Christmas season was approaching, the group needed to do something for the community. Some of us chimed in with several traditional responses: let’s have a canned-goods food drive; bake Christmas cookies; collect clothing for the needy.

Nothing resonated with any member of our group. Then, one of the other teenagers said, “Let’s do something different.” The remark to “do something different” was just the impetus we needed.

“How about re-enacting a ‘living nativity scene’ on the front lawn of our church?” somebody asked. The comment was well received by the group, but there were a lot of questions.

“What is a ‘living nativity scene’?”

“How would it work?”

“Who would organize it?”

Fortunately, my twin brother, Richard, and I were involved as charter members with the first ‘living nativity scene’ performance for the Covenant Presbyterian Church when we lived in Albany, Georgia. In addition, the concept of a ‘living nativity scene’ was not totally new to everybody in the group. Some members of the group had either witnessed a live re-enactment in some other part of the country, or had viewed it on television. The more we talked about the idea, the more enthusiastic everybody became. Before long, it was unanimous that we would undertake the project for our Christmas activity.

I do not have as vivid a memory about how every aspect of that first 'living nativity scene' on the island came together. But I certainly now respect the organization it must have taken as adult church members took on the responsibilities of constructing the manger and stable, designing and creating the costumes, building the staging and scenery, erecting the lighting, arranging the narration and music, and bringing in actual animals.

Regardless of the origin of the idea, the credit for the first production goes to the adult leadership. What had started as a Senior High Youth Group activity rapidly expanded into a project that encompassed much of the entire church family. And, it enjoyed enthusiastic support from our popular Minister, Dr. Benjamin F. Moore.

As the debut performance began on a cold winter night in 1963, a small band of teenagers took turns, over the course of a full week of performances, portraying an angel, a shepherd, one of the Wise Men, or assuming the coveted roles of Mary and Joseph. And, I remember the crowds of spectators and the large number of cars that slowed down as people drove past our church. Mostly, I remember the cold evenings, the camaraderie with my friends, the fragrant smells of freshly cut evergreens and hay, and the hot chocolate that was served. Each night at the conclusion of every performance, I remember feeling as warm inside, from having made a small contribution to my church community, as I did from the hot chocolate in my stomach.

Even today, more than five decades later, I still remember the very humbling and profound feeling I got every time I dressed in a costume to portray one of those very, very fortunate people who, more than 2000 years ago, witnessed the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. The re-enactment of that first Christmas remains an important part of me as a Presbyterian and as a Christian.

Let us pray...

Lord, thank you for sending us your Son. We are grateful for all the youth and adults who have shared the Christmas story to our island year after year. Help us to keep the wonder of the first Christmas in our hearts always. Amen.

Note: Join us Dec 18 and 19 for Live Nativity 2020!

DECEMBER 18

WRITTEN BY SOPHIE HIDALGO

Luke 2:10-11

Like most families, we have our Christmas traditions, beginning with the SSPC Advent Festival where we make Christmas crafts, enjoy good food, and my favourite part - Cookies! In the past few years, you would find me as a “busy elf” in the Children’s area. This time together with my church family is when I begin to reflect and think about why we celebrate Christmas.

Ever since I can remember my sisters and I have participated in another SSPC tradition, the Live Nativity, and, of course, there is always great food and lots of cookies in between performances for the cast! Through the years, I have been every character of the Christmas story from a tiny angel or shepherd to the coveted role of Mary. But again, I am reminded each year as we share with the island community, the real reason for the season.

As Christmas day approaches, the Christmas Eve service, singing carols on the lawn in front of the church, and dinner with my family adds to our joy. I have fond memories of having dinner at my grandmother's house but since her passing, we began a new tradition by going to Bennie's Red Barn where they have a big Christmas tree, fire, and we see lots of friends. Christmas morning always includes my mother's breakfast casserole, sharing presents, laughing, and taking pictures.

Throughout the season I'm reminded of Christ's presence in my life and why we celebrate Christmas. I realize that this year may be different but I don't think a pandemic will cancel the joy I feel!

Let us pray...

Lord, our celebrations of Christmas bring us great joy! We thank you for sending us Christ Jesus to live among us and show us your abounding love. Guide us in ways that we may share joy with others. Amen.

DECEMBER 19

WRITTEN BY TOM & BRENDA HAUGHNEY

Be steadfast and immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

1 Corinthians 15:58 (adopted by our mission team)

We typically find our greatest joy and hope in close relationships we have with family, friends and church. Life is good where we live, so we don't have to look far. Little did we realize that in 2020, Joy and Hope would find us in the unlikeliest of places - amid devastation, death, and despair.

We were blessed to be members of a work team commissioned by SSP to be with a multi-denominational team from 4 states to work on home reconstruction in the wake of disastrous tornadoes in the Cookeville, TN area in March of this year. We went to help others and returned tired, yet humbled by those who daily live in dire circumstances and still maintain the spiritual attributes expected by our faith which we often take for granted. One of the many humbling illustrations was presented to us at the first evening's gathering when Kevin, the non-profit's local project manager, related a recent example of how Joy is manifested, with God's help, when we Pray, Believe, maintain our Faith, and "hold on a little longer."

Kevin had been working to begin rebuilding Fran's home, but had experienced repeated delays. The process had taken so long that Fran was starting to doubt her faith, and why total strangers would come to rebuild her home. Kevin would regularly tell her to believe that God will provide all the help she requires but she must keep praying and not give up. The Friday before our (total strangers') arrival, Kevin met Fran at her homesite and showed her the flat-bed trailer that had arrived, filled with all the wood and supplies necessary to re-build her home. He asked her, "Do you believe now?" What joy we felt with her, as well as knowing that God will also provide the help we need, no matter how bad or hopeless the situation seems to us, as long as we never doubt or give up on Him.

As members of the choir, we find most of our attempts to express our beliefs can be represented through song. We would like to share a song with you that illustrates our experiences in Cookeville, with Fran and all the others.

Help Is on the Way

*A woman in the bible days, her last meal almost gone
But God sent Elijah, to make his word known
He said woman don't you worry, for God sent me today
And before you even ask me, help is on the way.*

Chorus

*Just hold on a little longer, help is on the way
A brighter day is coming, for those who believe and pray
Help won't help tomorrow, if you give up today
Just hold on a little longer, help is on the way*

*Troubles of this life come by, and burdens get you down
You think no one is listening, you think no one's around
Just remember what his word says, "trust Him and obey"
Keep your eyes towards the heavens, cause help is on the way*

We pray you will find joy and hope as you await the coming of the Christ child.

Let us pray...

God of all Comfort. We put our hope and trust in you. Thank you for the opportunities where we can lift up others and encourage them to keep their eyes on you for strength. Guide us in being the "help on the way." Amen.

DECEMBER 20 ~ FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

THE CANDLE OF LOVE

ADVENT WREATH ~ LIGHT ALL THREE PURPLE CANDLES AND THE PINK CANDLE AND REFLECT ON THE WAYS YOU ARE AMAZED BY LOVE.

So, what do you think? With God on our side like this, how can we lose? If God didn't hesitate to put everything on the line for us, embracing our condition and exposing himself to the worst by sending his own Son, is there anything else he wouldn't gladly and freely do for us? And who would dare tangle with God by messing with one of God's chosen? Who would dare even to point a finger? The One who died for us—who was raised to life for us!—is in the presence of God at this very moment sticking up for us. Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ's love for us? There is no way!

None of this fazes us because Jesus loves us. I'm absolutely convinced that nothing—nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable—absolutely nothing can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us.

Romans 8:31-39 (The Message)

WRITTEN BY HELEN ALEXANDER IN 2002

Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

James 1:17

It almost always snowed on Christmas Eve when I was growing up in West Virginia. As children, excitement mounted as we imagined Santa and his sleigh being able to travel even faster through the snow. I can still close my eyes and smell the coal fire in the fireplaces used to heat our home. At night it was banked so that the fire did not completely go out,

and we were grateful for beds piled high with Grandma's hand-made quilts, so heavy we could barely move.

The gift of music was everywhere, especially at Christmas time. We looked forward to the church nativity play on Sunday night prior to Christmas, presented by young people of all ages dressed in angel costumes or flannel bathrobes borrowed from Dads. I remember the excitement and nervousness accompanying "being on stage!" We sang no matter what we were doing. Rehearsal time for my sister and me was while doing dishes, and for my brother and me, while doing chores outside on the farm. I never got tired of the Christmas songs.

It seemed as if Christmas would never arrive, but then it was over too soon. We feasted on the traditional turkey and all the trimmings with homemade mincemeat and pumpkin pies for dessert at my grandparents' home on Christmas Day, then went home to begin the long wait until next Christmas!

Looking back, rather than gifts under the Christmas tree, the gifts most precious were family, church, snowy winters, music, and of course, the warmth from Grandma's hand-stitched quilts I continue to enjoy even now.

Let us pray...

Thank you, Lord, for your precious gifts of life, light and love, bringing music that fills our souls. Amen.

DECEMBER 21

WRITTEN BY BONNIE TURNER (WITH JOHN, RENICK, INDIA PEARL, DELLA & TOWNES)

"We love because God first loved us." 1 John 4:19

We have spent many hours, days, weeks and months together as our family of six since the pandemic began. While we miss our extended family and friends dearly, the quality time with all of our babies is something I know we'll always cherish.

Every year Christmas morning becomes more exciting for us as we tend to add another baby every couple of years! This year will be Townes's first Christmas and the first Christmas

Della will really be excited. One of my favorite traditions is when we wake up early and my parents and my brother come over to wait for the kids to wake up to see their faces when they come out to see if Santa came. This year, if it is safe for my parents to come, we'll all be wearing masks, but that won't stop the excitement and joy!

Let us pray...

Loving Lord, we thank you for family. Let us all look at the coming of Christmas through a child's eyes... full of wonder and excitement! Our hearts are filled with joy! Amen.

DECEMBER 22

WRITTEN BY FRANCES MCCRARY

Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me. Matthew 25:40

Macon, Georgia during The 40's and 50's was a great place to grow up. World War II was over, patriotism was high, expectations were low, and there was a youthful innocence that life was good. Beneath the surface there were rumblings of racism, but it was not a subject discussed openly.

One year we had an unusually severe cold snap in the weeks before Christmas. Flu was rampant and my parents struggled to keep me and my sisters healthy, warm, and well-fed on a shoestring budget. Late one afternoon there was a knock on the door and I ran to open it. There stood a frail middle-aged African-American woman with nothing on to keep her warm but a thin sweater. My mother spoke briefly with her and then, without hesitation, took her warm winter coat from the closet and wrapped it around the woman before she stepped back into the cold.

In my child's mind, I knew my mother had done something very kind and unselfish but it was not until later that I realized what a sacrifice she had made. She had given the hurting woman her only good winter coat, leaving the threadbare one for herself.

Perhaps this story touches me because it was my mother, but it somehow reminds me of the spirit of that first Christmas ... God looked down on a hurting world and gave his only son to save us. What an awesome gift. May we seek opportunities to share this kind of unconditional love not only at Christmas but always.

Let us pray...

Lord of Compassion, we see your love shining through the actions of others. Show us ways that we, too, can share your perfect love with others.... Not only at Christmas but all through the year. Amen.

DECEMBER 23

WRITTEN BY ELIZA WARNER

Since we have been acquitted and made right through faith, we are able to experience true and lasting peace with God through our Lord Jesus, the Anointed One, the Liberating King. Jesus leads us into a place of radical grace where we are able to celebrate the hope of experiencing God's glory. And that's not all. We also celebrate in seasons of suffering because we know that when we suffer we develop endurance, which shapes our characters. When our characters are refined, we learn what it means to hope and anticipate God's goodness. And hope will never fail to satisfy our deepest need because the Holy Spirit that was given to us has flooded our hearts with God's love.

Romans 5:1-5 (The Voice)

In a world full of uncertainty, how am I amazed by love?

Uncertainty. I think I have heard that word more times throughout the past nine months than I have in my entire life. And I've experienced it, too. One of my last college semesters was cut short, my plans for a summer job fell through, my love for travel came to a halt, and I had to go back to Nashville at a different time than my closest friend to move out of our apartment in May.

But I've also experienced remarkable and unforeseen love this year. And yes, I am amazed. One of the most wonderful ways I experienced God's love was getting ***engaged!*** Yes, a *pandemic proposal!* My now fiance, Luke, proposed to me in July in the exact spot where we had met 3 years ago by the Epworth fountain. We returned to my mom's house to be congratulated by our loved ones... scattered across our backyard, of course. Wow... what a blessing from God to be engaged to my best friend!!!

Another unexpected result of the pandemic was being able to spend more time with my family. I came home from Nashville, and my brothers, Jackson and Hart, came home from Macon. Our "spring breaks" were extended for weeks giving us time to hang out (and, yes, mom chased us around with a camera for her Children's Chapel from *My Backyard* movies!). Along with many others who enjoyed this extra family time, we added a four-legged family member... a cute *pandemic* puppy named Willow. Again, wow... what a blessing from God!!! Being at home also gave me more time to go kayaking, paddleboarding, biking and resting in God's breathtaking creation. If you know me, you know that is a great blessing to me!

My heart is full of the blessings of Christ's astounding love in an unlikely time.

However, and many of you can probably relate, I have also felt a lot of anxiety and fear. More than I would like to admit. Finishing up college online in a totally different format, which was shortened and intense, was overwhelming at times. Wedding planning in a pandemic has its challenges too. And not being face-to-face with my college friends has been tough. But as the verses from Romans remind us, we develop endurance in the *seasons of suffering*. I have learned to be patient and *anticipate God's goodness* which has strengthened and changed my faith and my life.

One recent morning, God taught me through a devotion about the word 'surrender.' When we pray it is easy to ask God for things. And we should! God cares about the desires of our hearts. However, what's more important is to pray... *God, through all of my wants, I*

surrender to you. Your plan is best. I trust in you, because of the love you have for me. My prayers earlier this year included: God, I want this pandemic to go away. God, I want my anxiety with school to go away. God, I want every single one of our friends and family to be able to attend mine and Luke's wedding this spring. And so on. My prayer now? God, I surrender to you. I trust in your love for me.

2020 has been a year full of *uncertainty*. And most of the time surrendering and turning to God has been my only option. Maybe you can relate. But what an extraordinary gift! How blessed are we as God's children to be able to turn to the *Creator of the Universe* for hope, peace and joy during life's crazy and unanticipated storms.

I am certain that in the days ahead, I will face *seasons of suffering*... not unlike a pandemic! That's a guarantee. But I am also certain that the *Holy Spirit will flood my heart with love*. That is God's promise that is revealed to us through the Christmas story. We find the unconditional love of a father that cares for me and you so much that he sent us Jesus. He sent the One perfect person into a very imperfect world to be our Saviour. And yes, I am amazed.

Let us pray...

Dear Father, You are good. Thank you for loving me unconditionally, even in the storms and times of fear. I surrender to you. I place my hope and trust in you. Your plan is best, and I am amazed. Amen.

CHRISTMAS EVE

WRITTEN BY NAT SCOTT (WITH JAMIE & RYAN)

ADVENT WREATH ~ LIGHT THE CHRIST CANDLE WITH ALL FOUR CANDLES AS YOU REFLECT ON THE BIRTH OF OUR SAVIOUR.

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.

Luke 2:1-5

The first Christmas Eve was just another day. A day like all others, with folks going about their lives fishing and farming and going to market and opening shops. Certainly there was a bit more traffic in town with the census requiring folks to be registered in their birthplaces. Perhaps the merchants were pleased to see these travelers and the additional opportunities for business. Perhaps townspeople grumbled at the added congestion and their own disrupted schedules. All told, it was just another day.

And so, most people went about their day without a clue about what kind of day it really was. The shepherds took to the fields with their flocks, watching closely for predators. And in Jerusalem, an elderly prophet Simeon, and an elderly prophetess Anna, did what they had done as part of their routine for many years; they prayed to their God for His powerful appearance and the glorious rescue of His people through the long-awaited Messiah.

Meanwhile, Herod was sitting on his throne, feeling fat and happy. His upbringing as a Jew and his father's ties to Julius Caesar had allowed him to rise to power easily. Herod's construction projects (including the second Temple at Jerusalem) had brought him fame and adulation. On this day he had no real worries about losing his title as King of the Jews.

No one thought that it was anything but a normal day. They didn't have the benefit of history like we do. No one thought that tomorrow would bring the birth of a child that would turn the world upside down and inside out. Who could know that a fragile human baby would create such an earth-shaking event that all of mankind would mark time by it? Those sweet and lowly shepherds had not a clue that tomorrow's events would fill them with such fright and joy that even the heavens would burst forth in praise over all the earth. Herod, in his arrogance, could not imagine his own imminent death nor the destruction of his Temple. Simeon and Anna were yet unaware that their prayers would finally be answered and that in a few short days they would see and hold the infant Messiah in their arms.

The first Christmas Eve was a day not unlike this one. May we remember that unremarkable day as we muddle through this worrisome and uncertain time. And though we won't be able to meet in the ways that we have become accustomed to, in cozy sanctuaries surrounded by friends with candles all ablaze, I pray that we would remember God's promise and His deliverance. May we focus on the unremarkable nature of our lives wrapped carefully in the precious and miraculous swaddling of Christ's arms. May we too, be born again into that rough-hewn manger on that lonely night along with our redeemer. Not only today, but every day! And may we be like Anna and Simeon, prayerfully expectant that God is still at work and may make tomorrow earth-shattering!

As Oscar Romero once said, "It is only the poor and hungry, those who know they need someone to come on their behalf, who can celebrate Christmas." *We are these people!*

Prayer ~

God, you know us so well. We have raced headlong in busyness and activity through this advent season. We are weary and poor in spirit. Please touch us with hope. Fill us with both gratitude and anticipation for Christmas. Fill us with your celebratory gladness, enough to last a lifetime. And thank you Lord for rescuing us, yet again.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

CHRISTMAS DAY

WRITTEN BY ALAN DYER (WITH ERIN, SAM & JACK)

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Luke 2:16-20

The best surprises sometimes just show up at your front door. The first one arrived about halfway through Advent in December 2016. On our front doorstep we found a brown paper bag containing two objects: first, a plastic façade of a barn, and with it was a small tan box, which, upon closer inspection, was revealed to be a bale of plastic hay. They came unannounced with no indication as to who the sender might be. The only writing was on the bag, which read simply, “For Sam’s Nativity Set.”

At the time, Sam – our oldest son – was every bit of two-years old. He was a little confused at first about what he was supposed to do with this barn and bale of hay but based on the other nativity sets in our house, he seemed to connect the dots and conclude that there would likely be more brown paper bags to follow. And sure enough, the next morning, we opened the door again and there was another bag sitting on the front step waiting to be opened. Reaching in he pulled out a donkey. And the next day came a palm tree, and then a sheep, and then shepherds, and then three wise men, an angel, and so on...

For over two weeks, it went on like this. Each morning, a new addition just sitting there at the door. We had no idea who was delivering this surprise under the veil of darkness each night. We confronted several neighbors and church folk we thought might be capable of such unencumbered Christian kindness, but each time were met with what passed as genuine befuddlement.

Nonetheless, that simple store-bought plastic nativity on our front stoop became for us a central image of the story we celebrate today. After all, the story of Jesus' birth is that of God quietly leaving an unsolicited gift on the doorstep of humanity. And the gift that of that child is the same gift that I saw in Sam's face each day during those weeks: the gift of real, authentic joy.

Here we are four years later, and our family, which has now grown to include our younger son, Jack, continues to watch and wait each Christmas. And so today we will wake once more and look for signs of God's joy in the flesh and blood of our own lives: in the delight of unwrapping gifts, in the laughter of a shared meal, in the wave from a neighbor, in the kindness of a stranger, even in the tears of exhaustion when bedtime finally rolls around. Every moment is a reminder of what Christmas is all about: God whose love is so great that it chose to come down and be among us.

Christmas love is the kind that sticks with us through all the good and all the challenging of life. It is a love that puts the last in line at the front and gives the best seat at the table to the worst sinner in the room. It is a love capable of healing the sick and raising the dead. It is a love that gives VIP treatment to smelly shepherds and helps guide wisemen across vast deserts at night. It is a love that is even capable of depositing the best surprise of all – unexpected and unannounced – at our own front doors: Joy.

Merry Christmas.

Joy to the world!

The Lord is come.

Let earth now receive her King!

Let us pray...

Glory to you, God most high! You sent us your Child, the light of the world, to share in the warmth of your great love. Though the path is sometimes dark, you shine the way. Though the nights are sometimes long, you are our hope. Make us messengers of the good news and shepherds of your people; guide us always in paths of peace. Amen.

BLESSINGS FOR 2021

WRITTEN BY ANNIE FRANKLIN ARVIN (WITH THOMAS & MOLLY CLAIRE)

The season of Advent is my favorite season. I love the calendars. I love the devotionals. I love the candles. I love most what this season is about: waiting, watching, and preparing. In many of the prophetic stories of the Old Testament, and even in first parts of each gospel, the authors confess something. They name the pains of this world and they ask God for a savior. I love that these prophets admit the world is not as it should be and we, the mere humans that we are, cannot fix it. Together in the season of Advent, we name that we need God's help. Over and over again, the prophets remind the people of Israel that God has not left and a savior is coming. They say to wait. They say to watch. They say to prepare.

So that's what we've done. We've shared stories with one another about how our families keep watch this season of Advent. We've invited one another into our homes as we read these stories of hope, peace, joy and love. We've shared how we are waiting for the Savior to arrive and we rejoiced together as God came into the world in the form of a small child and born to two very human parents. Hallelujah! We've prepared for Jesus' arrival and we've shouted "joy to the world" when it finally happened.

This season isn't just about watching, waiting, and preparing for Jesus's arrival into this world. It's also about preparing for the ways Jesus entering into this world transforms us-how Jesus transforms our lives from despair into hope. As this season comes to a close, we are invited to be transformed because Christ is here. Jesus is at work in the world healing, teaching, proclaiming Good News to the poor, release to the captive, and demanding love of our neighbor. Jesus is here turning our despair into hope. We've waited for this. We've kept watch for this very moment. And it is here.

Friends, may this new year be blessed. May you be prepared to receive the transformation in Christ. May your eyes be open to seeing God transforming the world. May your heart be ready to feel God transforming the despair we feel all too keenly into hope. Amen.

FIRST COMING BY MADELEINE L'ENGLE

He did not wait till the world was ready,

till men and nations were at peace.

He came when the Heavens were unsteady,

and prisoners cried out for release.

He did not wait for the perfect time.

He came when the need was deep and great.

He dined with sinners in all their grime,

turned water into wine. He did not wait

till hearts were pure. In joy he came

to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.

To a world like ours, of anguished shame

he came, and his Light would not go out.

He came to a world which did not mesh,

to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.

In the mystery of the Word made Flesh

the Maker of the stars was born.

We cannot wait till the world is sane

to raise our songs with joyful voice,

for to share our grief, to touch our pain,

He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!