

God is Love

*An Advent Devotional
By Jean Craig*

*Advent 2020
Originally written in 1979*

**Centenary United Methodist Church
Richmond, Virginia**

Jean Craig

Jean Craig was a long-time member of Centenary United Methodist Church. In 1903, she was “born in the shadow of the cross,” as she liked to say. Her home was literally next to her beloved Centenary. Jean studied to be an English teacher. When she was 25, she felt compelled to become a missionary and serve in Asia. Supported by the women of the Methodist churches of Virginia, Jean embarked on her life’s mission to “win the world for Christ in one generation.” Jean sailed into Shanghai in September 1929 and served in China until 1949. When the turbulent politics of China forced her out of that country, Jean moved her missionary work to Korea, where she served for 5 ½ more years. Jean passed away on January 15, 1998 and is buried in Hollywood Cemetery. Her tombstone is inscribed with the words: “Missionary to China and Korea who dedicated her life to worldwide missions and her body for the benefit of others.”

Advent Devotionals

Jean Craig loved the children of Centenary deeply and loved to share the Christmas Story with them. For many years, she would write Advent Devotionals for the Centenary children. On the first Sunday of Advent, the children would gather in the classroom on the second floor of Centenary to make an Advent wreath using a green Styrofoam circle and fresh cut greenery. Jean would lead the children through the First Sunday in Advent and then the children would take home the wreath to share with their families. Jean wrote this Advent Devotional in August 1979.

A LETTER TO YOU

DEAR BOYS AND GIRLS,

Can you imagine thinking about Advent in August? That's what I am doing. As I write this letter to YOU, it is August 9, 1979. This is a special day for me because FIFTY YEARS AGO TODAY, our big boat steamed under the golden-gate bridge at San Francisco and I was on my way to China!

How do I know this? Because Mother saved my letters. I have been reading those letters; all about the trip on the big ship, our arrival in Shanghai, the tour of our mission, and the Language School in Peking. As I read about that wonderful first Christmas in China, I remembered how happy I was, and I knew I wanted to share that happiness with YOU.

That first Christmas I was living in the Language School in the old, old city of Peking. Just like Jerusalem, in Jesus' day and now, Peking had a wide, high wall that ran all around the city. There were ten huge gates in the wall; each one bigger than a house. Today Peking has no city wall and no rickshaws either. A rickshaw was a two-wheeled carriage pulled by a man who ran in front. I went everywhere in a rickshaw. I'm glad there are no rickshaws today because I don't like to think a man should do the work of a horse.

In my letters to Mother, I told about a Christmas sermon I heard a famous Chinese minister preach. I shall use some of Dr. Tsu's thoughts in writing your Advent Services, so look for his name.

And now I wish YOU A HAPPY, HAPPY ADVENT 1979 and a JOYOUS CHRISTMAS. I also wish that when you are as old as I am now that you will have many, many, HAPPY MEMORIES TO SHARE.

Your friend,
Jean Craig

FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT

I DISCOVER SOMETHING ABOUT MYSELF

Dr. Tsu said that Christmas is a time for DISCOVERY, and I think he was right. Everybody likes to find out about things. Remember last Christmas when you tried your best to discover what present was in the largest box before you opened it?

I don't think Dr. Tsu was talking about that kind of DISCOVERY. Let's find out what he meant.

First, let's begin with a question. What word would you choose to describe how you FEEL when you hear the word CHRISTMAS? The word I have chosen has _____ (5) letters. How about your word?

Did you choose the same word I did? ... Another question. WHY do you FEEL HAPPY when you hear the word CHRISTMAS?

Because you'll receive presents? ... O.K., but what people give you presents? (I'm waiting for your answer.)

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That's good! Your answer is the same as mine ... parents, family, friends! Now you're ready for another question! WHY do these people give you presents?

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Good! You're right again ... "because they LOVE you", and because to them YOU are _____! Can you discover that 9 letter word? The first letter is "i" and the last letter is "t". Let me give you a hint.

Several years ago a friend invited me to a family Christmas party in a restaurant. It was a special party because the oldest grandson would very soon be six years old. This would be the last time he could eat in that restaurant without paying. I was lucky, I had the seat of honor next to that boy. We all had a wonderful time because we were honoring a boy who would soon be six. How do you think that boy felt?

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Right! He felt big ... IMPORTANT!

Perhaps you are wondering what FEELING IMPORTANT has to do with Christmas. I discovered the answer to that question right here in Richmond, when I was just a young girl and went to visit an old lady. She was all by herself, she was sick in bed, and it was Christmas. She didn't have a single present that I could see, but her bright smile showed me how she felt inside. She was HAPPY! I know why, do you?

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Yes, she was HAPPY because it was Jesus' Birthday. She knew that God's Gift of Jesus is the greatest Gift of all.

One more question. *WHY DID GOD GIVE THIS GREAT GIFT TO PEOPLE?*

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Good! You have discovered for yourselves what Dr. Tsu meant when he said that Christmas is a time for discovery. You also know what Dr. Tsu and the old lady discovered when they thought about Christmas. It's the same word you found when you decided why people give you presents.

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Will you say those wonderful words with me? I am important to God... I AM IMPORTANT TO GOD! That's what Christmas means.

Isn't it wonderful! We are important to our parents, our families, our friends, and we are also IMPORTANT TO GOD, who loved us so much that he sent Jesus to show us how to love. It doesn't matter how old we are or where we live. We may be babies, or 4 and 5, 7 and 8 ..., teenagers, grown-up, or very old. EACH ONE OF US IN ALL THE WORLD IS IMPORTANT TO GOD. GOD LOVES US EVERY SINGLE ONE OF US! THAT IS WHAT CHRISTMAS MEANS!

1st VERSE OF A NEW SONG JUST FOR YOU!

Tune: Jesus Loves Me

I'm important, don't you see,
You're important just like me,
God our Father, loves us all,
Whether we are great or small.

Chorus: Yes, G-o-d loves me,
 Yes, G-o-d loves me,
 Yes, G-o-d loves me,
 For Christmas tells me so.

(Each Sunday night we will add a new verse to this song and sing it at candle-lighting time.)

WORSHIP TIME

SING THE SONG YOUR FAMILY HAS CHOSEN

CANDLE LIGHTING TIME:

Lighter 1: I light the first candle to remind us that each person in all the world is important to God.

Each member of the family says: I AM IMPORTANT TO GOD.

All sing: “I'm important don't you see.”

PRAYER:

We thank you, Our Father, God, for loving us so much that you sent Jesus to show us how important we are to you. Help us to be the persons you want us to be.
Amen.

THINKING ABOUT WORDS FROM THE BIBLE:

The shepherds were important...they were told the Good News.

Luke 2: 8-12 There were some shepherds in that part of the country who were spending the night in the fields, taking care of their flocks. An angel of the Lord appeared to them... They were terribly afraid, but the angel said to them, “Don't be afraid! I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all the

people. This very day in David's town your Savior was born – Christ the Lord! And this is what will prove it to you; you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

Two old people were important ... they understood who Jesus was.

Luke 2: 25-28 At that time there was a man named Simeon living in Jerusalem. He was a good, God-fearing man and was waiting for Israel to be saved... When the parents brought the child Jesus into the Temple... Simeon took the child in his arms and thanked God.

Luke 2: 36-37 There was a very old prophetess, a widow named Anna... She never left the Temple; day and night she worshiped God.... That very same day she arrived and gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were waiting to see Jerusalem free.

PRAYER:

Thank you, dear God, for all the people who shared in that First Christmas. Thank you for our church and our home where we can learn more about what Christmas means. Thank you for that First Christmas and for this Christmas too. Help us never to forget that we are important to you. Amen.

SING THE SONG YOUR FAMILY HAS CHOSEN.

SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT

I DISCOVER OTHER PEOPLE

Dr. Tsu said that at Christmas time we discover our FELLOWMAN, but I have chosen two words that mean the same thing ... OTHER PEOPLE. Let's discover what Dr. Tsu was trying to tell us.

He said that at Christmas time we somehow feel differently toward people, and I think he was right. I remember how, when I was a little girl, I used to get into arguments, sometimes fights with my sister. I'm sure you've had that same experience; if not with a brother or sister, then with a playmate. But have you noticed that just before Christmas you don't feel so much like fighting! You feel like sharing! You don't have as much time to fight because you're too busy planning surprises. Have you noticed how hard it is to be angry at Christmas time? Maybe that's because we remember how much God loves us and how important we are to Him. Somehow we just want to be loving, as God is loving.

Dr. Tsu said that at Christmas time we feel more like giving. I think that's true, don't you? ... We hear over the radio about the Salvation Army's drive for shoes for poor children, and maybe your family does something about that need. It doesn't matter that you haven't seen those children. You know they are important to God and so they become important to you.

It's fun to share God's love in ways to help people who know they are important, for you discover how really nice people are. Let me tell you about what we students at the Peking Language School did. We gave two parties!

The first party was on the afternoon of December 23, 1929. Our guests were our teachers and their families. Besides adults, there were 110 children! Nobody spoke English except us students who were giving the party, but we all had great fun using the few Chinese words we had learned and acting out our thoughts. It was a great party with decorations and the best refreshments ... individual western-style cakes, candy, nuts and Chinese tea. After two funny stunts, we had a play which I had written. One student, who had studied Chinese for a whole year, was the Mother. She put a child to bed and as she told the Christmas Story, the child fell asleep. In her dreams she saw the Christmas Story in pantomime pictures. Between each picture there was Christmas music.

Our guests really had a good time. When it was time to go home, each child was given a present. How I wish you could have seen those adorable children and their proud parents!

The second party was even more of a thrill than the first, because it was such a great surprise to our guests. Never before had there been a party for the guests we chose to invite. Let me tell you about them.

Outside the gate of our language school, there was a rickshaw stand, just as outside a bus station or at an airport we have taxi stands. I rented a rickshaw by the month, and every morning I told the owner if I would need him after school. If I didn't need him, he could make money working anywhere he wished. Those of us who rode in rickshaws felt unhappy about it; we felt that no man should do the work of a horse. These men were so very kind to us that we wanted to let them know that they, too, were important people. That's why we gave them a party on Christmas Eve.

The thirty-five rickshaw men and their families made quite a crowd. Each guest wore his invitation pinned to his coat, so the gatekeeper would know to let them in. As each family arrived, we led them to the far end of the courtyard where we had built a stable-shed. This was the first time they had ever seen "the stable in Bethlehem." We didn't say a word; we just looked!

Next, everybody gathered around a huge fire at the other end of the courtyard, for it was bitterly cold and snow was falling. On that fire a very large pot of beef soup was bubbling. This soup and Chinese crackers were the main refreshments. How good it tasted! As we drank the soup, we listened to the principal of the language school tell the Christmas Story in Chinese. Then he stepped aside and pointed to the huge screen behind him.

Our guests looked in wonder at the beautiful slides showing the life of Jesus; most of them did not know about Jesus and they had never seen slides before. I shall never forget those happy faces! ... Suddenly we heard music. The Salvation Army band and singers had come to end our party with Christmas music.... It really was quite a party. I wish you could have felt our happiness and seen the children's joy when each one was given a western-style cake, a package of cookies, candy and nuts.

Yes, I think Dr. Tsu was right. CHRISTMAS is a time TO DISCOVER OTHER PEOPLE ... to be more loving to people we know, to help people we do not know, to think of ways to help people know they are important. What do you think?

WORSHIP TIME

SING THE SONG YOUR FAMILY HAS CHOSEN

CANDLE LIGHTING TIME:

Lighter 1: I light the first candle and remember,
I AM IMPORTANT TO GOD.

Each member of
the family says: I AM IMPORTANT TO GOD.

All sing: "I'm important don't you see."

Lighter 2: I light the second candle and remember,
PEOPLE ARE IMPORTANT TO ME.

Each member of
the family says: PEOPLE ARE IMPORTANT TO ME.

All sing: God has plans for you and me
Kind and thoughtful friend to be;
At home, at school and everywhere,
God's great love is ours to share.

Chorus

THINKING ABOUT WORDS FROM THE BIBLE:

Matthew 22: 37, 39 Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart ... and love your neighbor as you love yourself."

John 15: 12, 14 Jesus said, "My commandment is this: Love one another as I love you. You are my friends if you do what I command you."

PRAYER:

Thank you, dear God, for Jesus who shows us how important we are to you. As we get ready to celebrate Jesus' Birthday, help us to find new ways to be kind and loving. Thank you for letting us be Friends of Jesus, people who share your love. Amen.

SING THE SONG YOUR FAMILY HAS CHOSEN.

THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

I DISCOVER SOMETHING ABOUT GOD

Dr. Tsu said that CHRISMAS is a time to DISCOVER ABOUT GOD. He said that when we are kind, loving and helpful to other people, we feel close to God; we discover what God is like. What do you think about that?

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Let's think about the time that great crowds of people, thousands of people, followed Jesus and forgot about how the time was passing. Before they knew it, it was evening and they were far from home and hungry. Jesus asked if there was any food, and a boy offered his lunch. You know what happened. Jesus took the boy's lunch, blessed it, and fed all those thousands of people.

How do you think that boy felt? Do you think he was ever sorry he offered his lunch? Do you think anyone could ever make that boy wonder if God cares about people being hungry?

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Of course you know what happened when Mothers took their children to see Jesus. Suppose you had been one of those children; suppose you had heard Jesus say to his disciples, "No, don't send the children away. Let them come to me." How would you have felt? (I'm waiting for your answer.)

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Let's think some more about those children whom Jesus loved that day. Suppose those children heard some grown-up say, "God is like Jesus", how would they feel about God? ... Would they feel afraid? ... Of course not. They would know that God is kind and loving because they knew that Jesus was kind and loving.

Remember the farewell party we had for Dr. and Mrs. B? I was standing in line waiting to get into the fellowship hall, and I was talking to a grown-up. Suddenly, I felt a pull on my sleeve, but I kept talking. Another pull at my sleeve and I turned around. Looking down, I saw a young boy. He didn't want anything; he just wanted to say hello to his friend. He knew that I would want to say hello and that made me feel good right down to my toes. Because a young friend had found me and said hello, I began to feel God's love.

Yes, I really believe that GOD IS LOVE: that's why I think we want to be friends with people. Two years ago, in November 1977, I felt God's love in a very special way. I was in China and I was walking on the GREAT WALL ... not the city wall ... but the GREAT WALL! That WALL runs for thousands of miles, up and down over the mountains and it is very, very old. It was begun 250 years before Jesus was born, and it is still there. It is so big the astronauts could see it from the sky!

I was so busy thinking about the story of the WALL, that I didn't see a piece of ice. I would have fallen if a strong hand had not caught my arm. I turned to say thank you and saw that the person who had helped me was a young soldier.

He was surprised when he heard me say, "Hsieh, hsieh, NIN" ... surprised because I could speak Chinese but also because I had used a special word for "you". Fifty years ago I would never have said "NIN" when thanking a soldier. "NIN" was used when thanking important people like ministers, doctors, lawyers, teachers, old people ... never soldiers. And so when I said, "Hsieh, hsieh, NIN" to the young soldier on the GREAT WALL, he knew that I thought of him as an important person!

He led me to the other side of the wall, where the sun had melted the ice. We walked along for some time talking about China. Perhaps he wondered why we enjoyed talking to each other. I didn't wonder; I wanted to be friendly because I knew that God loved us both.

Yes, I really do think that the more we share love, the more we understand that GOD IS LOVE. Have fun discovering what God is like as you and your family and friends share love.

WORSHIP TIME

SING THE SONG YOUR FAMILY HAS CHOSEN

CANDLE LIGHTING TIME:

Lighter 1: I light the first candle and remember,
 I AM IMPORTANT TO GOD.

Each member of
the family says: I AM IMPORTANT TO GOD.

All sing: "I'm important don't you see."

Lighter 2: I light the second candle and remember,
PEOPLE ARE IMPORTANT TO ME.

Each member of
the family says: PEOPLE ARE IMPORTANT TO ME.

All sing: “God has plans for you and me.”

Lighter 3: I light the third candle and remember, GOD IS LIKE JESUS.

Each member of
the family says: GOD IS LIKE JESUS.

All sing: God’s like Jesus, this I know,
For the Bible tells me so,
When I think of God, I’m glad,
Never afraid and never sad.
Chorus

THINKING ABOUT WORDS FROM THE BIBLE:

The Bible is the BOOK that tells us what God is like. We shall think about just three things.

The answer Jesus gave to his disciples...

John 14:9 Jesus said “Whosoever has seen me has seen the Father.”

The verse that shows what God is like by what he did:

John 3:16 For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life.

Verses that tell us why we must love:

I John 4: 7-8 Dear friends, let us love one another, because love comes from God. Whoever loves is a child of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God for GOD IS LOVE.

PRAYER:

Again, dear God, we thank you for your LOVE and we ask you to help us show that we are Jesus’s friends by being kind and thoughtful ourselves. Amen.

SING THE SONG YOUR FAMILY HAS CHOSEN

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT

I DISCOVER WHERE GOD IS

Are you as glad as I am that Christmas is almost here? I love to think of that F I R S T C H R I S T M A S in Bethlehem, don't you? What part of the Christmas story do you like best?

Is it the part about the shepherds who watched their flocks by night, who saw a bright light and heard the angel's song and message? How surprised those shepherds must have been when the angel told them to look for the new born Child in a stable! They were expecting a KING and kings aren't usually born in stables but in palaces! I'm glad Jesus was not born in a palace. Can you guess why?

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Yes, because the shepherds would not have felt comfortable in a palace. They were poor, not rich, and yet God cares about them, too. That's one reason why people today who love Jesus, remember how important poor people are to God.

When Luke wrote the story of the shepherds, he didn't say anything about the shepherds' children, but I'm sure there were children who followed their fathers to the stable. How happy they must have felt when they looked in and saw the beautiful child!

Perhaps you like the story of the Wise Men best ... the Wise Men who followed the STAR! They were not Jews, they were foreigners, and they lived far, far away from Bethlehem. But God helped them to know that the INFANT KING would be born in Bethlehem. Imagine riding across the desert on a camel. Have you ever seen a camel? I have.

Early in the morning on my first Christmas Eve in China, I saw a long line of camels! I was going outside the city to get a small Christmas tree for my room, when I saw the camels. There were no kings. Their master was leading them outside the city into the country. The camels were carrying heavy bags of coal on their backs. As I watched them go through the city gate, I thought of the Wise Men who went through the city gate of Jerusalem on their way to Bethlehem.

We got our tree and were just ready to go back through the city gate, when I called to my friend, "Look, LOOK!"

We didn't say another word. We just looked. We could hardly believe our eyes! Just ahead of us was a man leading a donkey and on that donkey sat a beautiful Chinese lady, a small baby in her arms. I almost forgot where I was. I felt I was outside the city gate of Jerusalem when Mary and Joseph were carrying the Baby Jesus to the Temple. I felt happy down to my toes. Bethlehem seemed very near.

Then I remembered some very special words which we find in the Good News by Matthew ... another name for Jesus. "AND HE WILL BE CALLED EMMANUEL WHICH MEANS GOD IS WITH US." To me that is the very best part of the Christmas Story ... GOD IS WITH US. That's exactly how I felt as I watched the camels and the little family with the donkey. God's LOVE was near, not far away.

And now you have discovered WHERE GOD IS! Jesus came to show us that GOD IS WITH US. We know that GOD IS LOVE and that He is always near. I'm glad about the discoveries we have made these Sundays in Advent, but most of all I'm glad that God is always with us. What makes you glad?

WORSHIP TIME

SING THE SONG YOUR FAMILY HAS CHOSEN

CANDLE LIGHTING TIME:

Lighter 1: I light the first candle and remember,
I AM IMPORTANT TO GOD.

Each member of
the family says: I AM IMPORTANT TO GOD.

All sing: "I'm important don't you see."

Lighter 2: I light the second candle and remember,
PEOPLE ARE IMPORTANT TO ME.

Each member of
the family says: PEOPLE ARE IMPORTANT TO ME.

All sing: "God has plans for you and me."

Lighter 3: I light the third candle and remember, GOD IS LIKE JESUS.

Each member of the family says: GOD IS LIKE JESUS.

All sing: “God’s like Jesus, this I know”

Lighter 4: I light the fourth candle and remember, GOD IS WITH US.

Each member of The family says: GOD IS WITH US.

All sing: God is never far away,
God is with us every day,
And we feel his loving care,
As his love we gladly share.

Chorus

THINKING ABOUT WORDS FROM THE BIBLE:

Matthew 1:23 ... and his name shall be called Emmanuel (which means, God with us.)

Jesus wanted the people to know that God really cares about them and he talked to them about birds.

Matthew 6:26 Jesus said, “Look at the birds flying around, they do not plant seeds, gather a harvest and put it in barns; yet your Father in heaven takes care of them! Aren’t you worth much more than birds?”

PRAYER:

We thank you, dear God, for the Good News that Christmas tells. We thank you for the Baby Jesus, who grew up to be a man and taught us that you are our Father. We are glad that you love us, as Jesus loved the children long ago. We are glad that when we think of Jesus we know what you are like. We are glad we are important to you, not just our family but all people everywhere. Help us to know how to be your helpers by showing love to people. Thank you, God, for Christmas. Amen.

SING THE SONG YOUR FAMILY HAS CHOSEN.

CHRISTMAS EVE SERVICE

PARENT: Come, everybody in our family, come and thank God.

ALL: FOR THIS IS THE NIGHT WHEN THE CHRIST CHILD
WAS BORN!

ALL SING: O come, let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him,
Christ, the Lord. Amen.
(Chorus of O Come, All Ye Faithful)

CANDLE LIGHTING TIME:

PARENT: As we think of that First Christmas let us sing Silent Night,
Holy Night.

CHILD: As I light the four candles of Advent, we will sing the new song
that tells what each candle means.

I'm important, don't you see,
You're important just like me,
God our Father, loves us all,
Whether we are great or small.

Chorus: Yes, G-o-d loves me,
Yes, G-o-d loves me,
Yes, G-o-d loves me,
For Christmas tells me so.

God has plans for you and me
Kind and thoughtful friend to be;
At home, at school and everywhere,
God's great love is ours to share.
Chorus

God's like Jesus, this I know,
For the Bible tells me so,
When I think of God, I'm glad,
Never afraid and never sad.

Chorus

God is never far away,
God is with us every day,
And we feel his loving care,
As his love we gladly share.

Chorus

PARENT: Our Advent candles are burning low; it is time to light the Christ Candle, for this is the night the Child was born in Bethlehem.

(Lights candle and reads poem.)

Because Jesus came
Every year on Christmas night
Songs begin and candles glow,
And we talk, while stars shine bright,
Of a Christmas long ago.

And because he came,
Hearts are kinder everywhere,
And the hungry and the cold
And the sad have better care
Than they had in days of old.

All the year we'll still
Think of Christmas, we will show
Loving kindness in his name
Every day, till all shall know
That Jesus came.

Nancy Byrd Turner

ALL SING: Away in a Manager

CANDLE IN OUR WINDOW:

PARENT: Because Jesus was born in Bethlehem,

ALL: WE PLACE A CANDLE IN OUR WINDOW.

PARENT: "A little light in Bethlehem
No larger than a candle's flame,
A wee, white light in Bethlehem,
Silver and small it came.

And many slept and did not see
The faint far gleam when dark unfurled,
The little light that grew to be

ALL: THE LIGHT OF ALL THE WORLD"

(Elizabeth Thornton Turner)

PARENT: We welcome Jesus to our home this night and as a sign that he is welcome here.

ALL: WE LIGHT THE CANDLE IN OUR WINDOW.

PARENT: Our candle speaks for us to all who see it, saying.

ALL: JESUS IS BORN. WE WISH YOU CHRISTMAS JOY.

PRAAYER:

Dear God, help all who pass our house to see our candle and to remember Jesus. Help us to remember him, too, and also the families in far away places whom Jesus loves as he loves us. Help us to remember Jesus not only on his Birthday but all through the year. Amen.

ALL SING: Joy to the World, the Lord is Come.