



Rio Rancho

Presbyterian Church

2024 Advent Devotional

Large-Print

Dear Friends,

Our Advent devotional this year is based on themes from the book, *Calling All Angels: an Advent Study of Fearlessness and Strength*, by Erin Wathen. It focuses on times when God or God's messengers have told humans, "Do not be afraid."

It is organized a bit differently than in previous years: by week rather than by day. At the beginning of each week, we have included two Scripture passages and a selection of hymns from the Glory to God hymnal that fit the theme of the week. Each week has two prompts:

Week 1: Tell a story of when silence has been difficult and/or healing. Tell a story of when you have embraced hope in the face of fear.

Week 2: Tell a story of a time that you have felt called to do something outside your comfort zone. Tell a story about a courageous person in your life who broke through barriers and inspired you.

Week 3: Tell a story of a holiday traditions in your family – what are some traditions that have remained and what have changed? Tell a story of how you have found and claimed moments of joy in difficult or dark times.

Week 4: Tell a story of a surprise or disruption to your holidays. How did you meet the challenge? Tell a story of a holy disruption in your life or the life of your church: how do you cultivate a readiness for surprise and prepare to be amazed instead of afraid?

We invite you to think about and perhaps write your own reflections on the week's theme as part of your spiritual practice for this holy season.

We are so grateful to all the folks who contributed to this year's Advent devotional. In this time of transition, we were not sure whether we could continue this tradition, so a huge thank you from the Worship Committee to everyone who participated in this year's devotional.

As we approach Advent 2024, we are all experiencing some degree of uncertainty: in our personal lives, the future of our congregation, and the future of our world.

The constant reminder from the Scripture passages included in this devotional -“Do not be afraid” – is both a comfort and a challenge. What would it be like if we could truly face life and the future without fear? It is a question you are invited to ponder as we wait in hope for the birth of the Christ child, Emmanuel, God with us.

Blessings and peace, Birgitta Gustafson & the Worship Committee

WEEK ONE: Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silent – HOPE

HYMNS: O Come, O Come, Emmanuel (88), Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silent (347), Comfort, Comfort Now My People (87)

Luke 1:5-23: The Birth of John the Baptist Foretold

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was descended from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. Once when he was serving as priest before God during his section's turn of duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord to offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at

the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified, and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I know that this will happen? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur." Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he returned to his home.

Isaiah 40:1-5

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term,

that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord

shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

HOPE:

Our passage in Isaiah heralds some totally unexpected news for captive Israel. After some fifty years in Babylonian captivity, the prophet announces, "You are going home!" God "will lead his flock like a shepherd" across the wilderness back into the land flowing with milk and honey. It is a kind of new exodus, an occasion for great joy and celebration. "Our captivity is coming to an end. We are going home!"

Psalm 126 reflects the people's reaction: "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream, then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy." When an unexpected delight falls in our laps, we cannot help but rejoice and be glad. Like the shepherds out in the fields when they hear the angels announce "good news of a great joy to all the people". When they hear of the birth of a child King in Bethlehem, the shepherds must have been utterly delighted. And totally surprised!

And so are we when we experience unexpected delight, something we never dreamed possible. Can you remember such moments in your life? You could hardly believe it, something out of the blue, a gift from on high, a marvel and a delight. May this Advent and Christmas season give you moments of deep joy and happiness. Rejoice! Our Savior has come and is among us still. Immanuel. God is with us yet.. Thanks be to God.

-Rev. Frank Yates

Let all mortal flesh keep silent:

Silence for me has always been a challenge and a gift. As a rehabilitation counselor it would be so easy to work with someone who is struggling to adjust to a sudden disability by supplying them with the answers to every question they have. Asking questions about their life and being silent allowing them to tell their story, and express their emotions gives them a greater insight to their life and capability to meet the challenges before them. It is not always easy for me to do, but if I remain silent and patient the rewards are so great. When someone finds the answers from within, they also find a hope that they will gain strength as they journey through the rehabilitation process.

When I retired from 32 years of work which took up to 55 hours a week. We decided to make major change in our life. We decided to leave our home and family and journey across the country to New Mexico. My fear was that this might leave me starting over, finding my way around a strange place, would we make friends and find community. Our hope was to find a closer life together, and a place where we could build a warm and meaningful future. We found it here in Rio Rancho, especially Rio Rancho Presbyterian Church.

Be silent and embrace the hope and warmth of this Advent Season.

-Leah Gerlach

Silence:

Isaiah 30: 15 This is what the Sovereign Lord, the Holy One of Israel says: In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength. NIV

One of our sons was visiting us from London and asked us if we would be interested in attending a Buddhist Meditation with him in Santa Fe. Since the pandemic, he had been investigating this avenue that was

new to him. I said, “of course”, thinking what could go wrong in one hour of total quiet. It is usually when people start speaking that problems arise. Many years ago Mike and I had attended a Friends service where quiet is a prime part of worship, so we understood a little of the procedure. However, this time we were in the presence of a Buddhist monk. We were shown into a large room with wood paneling and dim lighting. Nick, our son, sat on a cushion on the floor, but we sat on chairs. When the gong sounded, total quiet began. At first, all the usual thoughts of daily activities kept my mind occupied, but then the quiet seemed to diminish all the material thoughts. Then an even deeper quiet seemed to settle in and spiritual thoughts became prayers to God, not for material things, but for greater understanding. Then I heard the gong again. “The hour isn’t over already, is it?” My immediate thought was, “Perhaps silence itself is a tool we have been overlooking.”

Dear God, Help us to learn how best to understand the magnitude of your ways. In our Lord’s name we pray. Amen

Hymn 347: Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silent

-Sharon Moe Furl

Keeping Silent

Scripture Isaiah 40:1-5

Keeping silent is of course a difficult thing for a prophet to do. When Isaiah writes: “Comfort, O comfort my people says your God” he better proclaim the message as loud as he can... It’s God’s Word. In these verses, God says God will be doing some great things. Great things for the people of Judah for that day and also great things for people in the future when Christ comes to save us, as the Church has applied this prophecy for us as well. So, who can keep silent about these things?

But sometimes, keeping silent is difficult, especially when we differ from those we love about things that are important to us.

In these recent weeks, perhaps you have been where I have been regarding political differences with family. I know where they stand, and they know where Genevieve and I stand. Are we keeping silent just to keep the peace? I'm writing this devotional prior to our elections by the way. My relationships with family are very important. My concern for our country is also very important. What do I do? Keep silent so as not to put our relationship in a rough place? Is fear motivating my silence? I have counseled many people on how to discuss differences with love. That's seldom easy. No matter how the election turns out, I need to remember (as Genevieve keeps reminding me) the phrase in the hymn, "This is My Father's World". "O let me ne'er forget, that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is Ruler Yet".

Prayer: Lord, help us to keep this perspective and help us to share what's important in a loving way. Amen.

-Russ Dykehouse

Silence:

"Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and with fear and trembling stand; ponder nothing earthly minded, for, with blessing in His hand, Christ our God to earth descendeth, our full homage to demand."

When I think of silence and this season of Advent, I cannot help but think of Advent 2020, in the middle of the COVID pandemic. It was a time that was truly 'unprecedented' – a word my students joked about (with gallows humor) as one of the many new vocabulary words they were forced to learn during that time. I remember how strange and disorienting life was – we stayed at home if we could, and when we had to go out, we wore masks that made it difficult to communicate with

other humans, partly because it was hard to understand each other through the masks, and partly because we could not see each other's faces. We learned to read people's moods through their eyes alone. There was no vaccine available yet at that time, so it was imperative that we isolate from each other, even from family that lived in the same city. It was a silent, solitary Christmas that year. My son lived in Colorado Springs, and we agreed that it would be too risky for me to drive up and bring him back to New Mexico. My daughter lived in Singapore, and with the total travel ban, I had no idea when I would see her or her husband again. So, I spent Christmas Eve night – the time that my Swedish family normally celebrates – alone. We had a Zoom call with my siblings and kids and nephews and nieces – we saw each other's faces and heard each other's voices and expressed our love for one another – because it always felt during that time that it was so important to say, “I love you” – just in case.

And then I sat alone in my house, with candles lit, and the Christmas tree lights twinkling, in silence. Such a deep silence. And it struck me that perhaps this was the most authentic experience of Advent that I had ever had – darkness, silence, uncertainty, waiting, hoping when hope seemed foolhardy. And I had a profound sense of the presence of God. God, who is the foundation of my life – of ALL life. God who is in silence, who IS the silence. And I felt at that moment, peace.

Prayer: God, our Creator, our Emmanuel, our Foundation, we confess that we rarely leave space for silence in our frantic lives. Help us to stop, to still the worries, and the fear, to listen to the silence, and in that silence, to know your presence. Help us to trust that, whatever the future holds, you are with us, walking beside us, lifting us up, giving us the strength to continue on. Amen.

Birgitta Gustafson

Overcoming Fear:

Luke 1:5-25 and Isaiah 40: 1-5

Fear visited me on August 3, 2024, when I had a very bad fall. As I sat on the sidewalk waiting for the rescue squad, I was worrying about my right arm. It was royally broken. Lisa, my daughter, was watching my head rapidly swell. I did not know about that injury.

After being placed in the ambulance, I felt a large bump on my head and fear gripped me. What if I had brain damage?

Immediately I became quiet and started praying for help. The fear that had me in its hold suddenly disappeared and I felt calm and assured that everything would be all right.

I had a CT scan of the brain, and everything was fine. The arm, however, was a different story. One of the top ten humerus breaks that anyone could have. I shattered my arm. I am slowly healing and have had to deal with physical therapy, occupational therapy, and wearing a protective brace for 16 weeks. Through prayers, quiet listening and patience, I am staying calm. God listened to my prayers, and I trust Him to be there for the rest of the recovery period. I know I have at least five more weeks of healing. If it is longer than that, so be it.

I believe that the trust I have in God has seen me through this rough stage of my life and will continue until my death. I do not fear the unknown, the future, nor even my death. Christ was born into this world (Advent season) to die (Lent season) for us so we may have everlasting life.

I pray that you can find comfort in our Lord. Any fear you may have can be turned into calmness knowing that God is with you now and forever.

Joan Roschevitz

WEEK TWO: Call and Response - PEACE

HYMNS: My Soul Cries Out with a Joyful Shout (100), Prepare the Way, O Zion (106), What Child is This (145)

Luke 1:26-38: The birth of Jesus is foretold to Mary

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." [a] 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." 34 Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" [b] 35 The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born [c] will be holy; he will be called Son of God. 36 And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God." 38 Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Isaiah 43:18-21

Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old.

I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?

I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches,
for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for
myself so that they might declare my praise.

Outside my comfort zone:

In 1971-1972 I was assigned to the Republic of Viet Nam. My job was in the Headquarters of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam {MACV}, Construction Directorate. My job was keeping track of construction expenditures and moving money around to fund construction of facilities for Army, Air Force, and Navy {including Marines} throughout the entire country.

In the military there are some jobs that are not accomplished by a specific division or unit, but shared by all those assigned to the particular base or headquarters. Your name is placed on a list, called a duty roster {either officer list or enlisted list}, and when one of those 'additional duties' comes up, the next person on the list is selected. My name came up to be a platoon leader for the defense of the MACV compound, that is, the portion that is not adjoining Ton So Nute {sp?} airfield. This duty was for a two-month period of time.

Being an Air Force person, rather than Army or Marine {ground forces}, I had heard the term 'platoon', but the Air Force does not even have platoons! I had no idea how large a unit a platoon was, etc., or how to accomplish this extremely important job of protecting the headquarters for all operations in Vietnam, which included all those high-ranking persons who were doing their jobs there. Anyway, I found myself in

charge of thirty-some enlisted personnel from all branches of the military.

Before our period of duty began, we all went to the firing range to refresh our skills with our assigned weapons. As a commissioned officer I had a caliber .45 auto pistol and the 'troops' assigned to me all had M-16 carbines. A carbine is merely a short rifle, and is much, much more accurate than a pistol. At the firing range, I shot better with my little pistol than the troops did with their shouldered M-16's, which made me even more apprehensive about this assignment; most of them couldn't hit the broad side of a big barn! I guess I should not have been so surprised, since they were all administrative types {NOT infantry types} from throughout the headquarters.

When our period of duty began, we were to 'man' the several defensive posts we had previously set up along the perimeter. For most of our time, though, things were relatively quiet in the country, including in the Saigon area, so instead of 'manning' our posts on the perimeter, we continued performing our normal duties within the headquarters. However, two days before our period of additional duty ended, the enemy threat increased dramatically, and the perimeter defense force was activated. This means that for two nights I was out on the perimeter with a group of GI's who were extremely poor shots. But, luckily, we had no enemy intrusions and no shots needed to be fired. I give thanks to the Lord for enabling me to perform this unfamiliar assignment properly, for the quiet period during most of its duration, and for the lack of enemy activity during the short, active period of my time as a platoon leader!

-Bill Shanklin

A person who inspired me:

My grandmother was a remarkable woman. She grew up in a tiny town in Upstate New York. She was the youngest of six children. Although her father died when she was six years old, my grandmother's childhood was filled with love and fun and family. She loved telling stories about her many adventures on the shores of Lake Champlain, swimming, fishing, helping her mother. And know all this, would it surprise you to know that, after she graduated from high school, she left her life behind? She moved to New York City in 1918 and entered nursing school at what is now Cornell University. 1918, the Influenza Pandemic. It was baptism by fire. She was immediately running to help patients, changing bed pans, feeding people. This young woman from a small town was doing important work.

Eventually, she married a young doctor and had a family. They had a medical practice in their home. It was a typical life for an average family. Her strength led the family through the Great Depression and World War II.

When I graduated from high school, I moved in to take care of her. She was demanding and insisted on things a certain way. I learned to cook things the way she liked them and clean things the way she liked them. In those last years of her life, I learned so much from her. And when I somehow managed to disappoint her, oh that was just the worst feeling. As she moved closer to the end of her life, she held on to that strength, dignity, the elegance. I worked hard to live up to her expectations.

She was a strong woman, smart, dignified, beautiful, and I am so lucky to have been a part of her life. I am today a strong person because of her.

-Christie Alison

Outside my comfort zone:

Have you ever felt called to do something outside your comfort zone? In 1960 between my Jr. and Sr. years of college I worked at a YMCA camp in northern Minnesota next to the “Boundary Waters Canoe Wilderness Area”. I was a counselor and was asked to lead a special girls trip of 14 days from Ely to lake Superior. The girls were selected for the honor of being “Girl Voyagers”. I had led shorter trips before (usually with a male counselor) but never alone for a trip this long. My concerns were: 1. Do I have the skills needed to lead these girls for many miles of paddling and portaging. 2. Without cell phones what if we had an emergency. 3. I knew that there would be wildlife including bears living in their habitat. I said yes and with much prayer along the way I completed this challenge. I felt God leading me out of my comfort zone all the way.

Luke 1: 26-38: Mary said yes to a much greater challenge and I’m sure she felt God at her side through it all.

A courageous person in my life was named Shirley. She hired me to work for her part time in a Frozen Food Lab. She guided me through many life decisions that I made during that time in my life. I am so thankful for her Godly advice.

Prayer: Please God guide us throughout our lives as we are called out of our comfort zones.

Thank you for Mary’s example of accepting the greatest challenge of all. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

-Helen Pederson

My inspiration:

My mother Laura stands out by inspiring me to be a better person. My grandparents were strong, hardworking Finnish immigrants. Finns describe this kind of inner strength as “sisu”, translated literally as ‘guts’, meaning you do what you need to do no matter what! My mother had sisu in spades!! Laura won a college scholarship but in the 1920’s, her parents thought college was a waste of money for a girl. After high school, mother married my birth father and worked several jobs to put him through college, only to have him leave her when I was 2 years old. Divorce was not common in the 1940’s. As a single woman, Laura rented a room in Canton, OH where she worked in an office, driving 2+ hours EVERY WEEKEND to see me in New Castle, PA where I lived with my grandparents from age 3 to age 10 when mother remarried. Laura took the train when she could not afford a car, but she ALWAYS CAME. As a child, her arrival was the highlight of my week! As an adult I realize the sacrifices she made in her own life to always be there for me. Mother remarried at my age 10 but sadly this man was an alcoholic. My only sister was born two years later. After years of abuse, Laura finally divorced 17 years later. Through it all, my sister and I were always her main concern. We knew early on that we would go to college no matter what! We were held to very high standards of behavior with a large dose of “sisu”!! Active involvement in church was non-negotiable. Mother died in 2003 at 85. Despite significant health issues, she remained alert and outspoken, especially if we disappointed her in some way. But I knew that “love always grew in my mother’s garden”. Our twin daughters just turned 50. As a parent, my mother’s care and devotion has inspired me from day one of their lives. God has blessed me beyond measure with an incredible mother!!!

-Linda Hood

PEACE:

Isaiah 43: 18-21 – Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches, for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

Understanding and discovering God's will for my life has been and continues to be challenging, difficult, and joyful. When I was preparing for college, choices for women were not particularly wide-reaching: nursing, teaching, or becoming support staff for an organization (i.e. a secretary), all of which were worthy jobs (the words "profession" or "career" weren't often mentioned; the question was "What are you going to do?") As a bit of background, I was raised in a small town in southwest Kansas; my father had a college degree, my mother did not. Both had been deeply affected by the Depression, as had many of their generation, and assuring that my brother and I went to college was a top priority. So, I chose teaching and never regretted my decision. My initial goal was to teach business subjects in high school, but I soon became very interested in community colleges.

I completed all the courses, learned theory, wrote numerous lesson plans, and completed student teaching at Kansas State University and thought I was ready! However, I was soon petrified when I began teaching in a small farming community in northern Kansas! What was I thinking? How could I enrich students' lives through my teaching? I soon learned that all the theory, etc. I had studied were helpful, but I really needed to understand my students and their thoughts about the world around them. This time was challenging but also rewarding as I learned so much from them. God was already working in my life, guiding my future as an educator. He was planning to "stretch" me in ways I could not have imagined.

A few years later I had the opportunity to teach at the community college level, and that experience was very rewarding. God then saw something new for me—moving to administration. Oh what unseen circumstances were ahead! For 22 years I worked at the UNM campus in Gallup, where around 90% of our students were Native American. There was a steep learning curve about culture, family values, perspectives on education, and understanding how to incorporate education with cultural mores of mostly Navajo and Zuni communities. God was with me all the way, showing me how to work through some very difficult situations. When my faith faltered, I put my trust in the Lord and through Him was able to do the impossible and move forward. At times God must have wondered if I would ever learn! But He never gave up on me, and I (probably too slowly) began to discover, understand, and trust His plans for me. I was truly blessed to have a wonderful career experience full of gratitude and joy.

As I often reflect on my career in education and the many directions it has taken me, I try to focus on what God has given me during those experiences that has prepared me for something new in this stage of life. They were faith-building times when I learned that God is always faithful and that I can trust Him through big and small changes. While this may seem achievable without great effort—after all, it's about Faith--sometimes the lessons learned take time to fully appreciate. God is good; His grace and love endure forever.

Dear God, as we prepare to celebrate your son's birth, help us to understand your plan for, not only Jesus, but all of us as you walk with us in our journey. Help us to be faithful, trusting, and joyful. Your grace and love will last forever. Amen.

-Beth Miller

WEEK THREE: Hopes and Fears of All the Years – JOY

**HYMNS: O Lord, How Shall I Meet You? (104), People Look East (105),
Now the Heavens Start to Whisper (94)**

Matthew 1:18-25 The call of Joseph to take Mary as his wife

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah[a] took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

“Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife but had no marital relations with her until she had given birth to a son, and he named him Jesus.

Isaiah 43:1-2

But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name; you are mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you,
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.

Hopes and Fears of all Year – Joy

During WW II my mother was given the name of an Army soldier that was hospitalized and began to write to him. He had spent his entire time in the military in a hospital in California. He had contracted what is commonly known as Dessert Disease. After he was released he traveled to Kansas City to meet Mom. Marvin had recently been discharged from the Army when he met Mom. He was heading to his home state, North Carolina and once there he told his family he was going to return to Kansas City to marry an Angell. My mother's maiden name was Opal Angell. Mom and Dad were married on November 24, 1948. They rented an upstairs apartment just west of Mom's childhood home. Because of my Dad's illness and the depression Mom went through, both of my parents were very thin in those days.

Three years into their marriage with three young children they were faced with another setback. On Friday, July 13, 1951 Kansas City was devastated by a flood waters. Dad had moved Mom, Harold, Suzi and I to a safe location as he helped stack sandbags along the Kaw River which was on the Western edge of Kansas City. All the workers were told to evacuate because the dikes would not hold. Dad made it out just before the flood waters hit Armourdale. The only memory I have of this time was holding onto a chain-link fence looking down the road for someone to come back for me. The flood was known as "Black Friday the Thirteenth", because that is when it happened. Mom told me later in life that they moved from place to place because they did not want to wear out their welcome with the relatives or friends they were staying with. It took three months for the flood waters to recede and left every home heavily damaged.

After the flood waters receded Dad connected with someone who delivered a bus that was damaged by the flood, he had it placed on the property. He had access to a one room home that he attached to the bus. The one room home was used as our kitchen and family room. I have often wondered if FEMA had provided the one room structure.

The bus attached to the one room structure and became our sleeping area. We had an army blanket and we slept on the back bench seats of the bus. Mom and Dad had a double bed at the front of the bus. Dad seemed to always be working. When he took a vacation he worked on a new house for his growing family. He used 60 lb. concrete blocks. It took a number of years to build our new home, because Dad did not believe in making a loan. Sometimes during the summer months, my older brother Harold and I would carry blocks to where Dad was working.

Both of my parents had gone through the depression and were now as a couple finding their way. Mom felt the full effects of the depression, since her father passed away shortly before it. Mom went to work for a local burger drive-in near her family home. As I grew older, I became the person who was put in charge of the younger siblings. Since I was just eighteen months older than my sister this was a challenging task at times.

Our family always gathered together for the Christmas Eve, usually at my parent's home. Christmas Mom always made an effort to buy one thing that each of us had expressed an interest in. All my aunts, uncle, and cousins were there. Everyone came with something that would accent what meat Mom had prepared. I had not thought of how this happened. My cousins, siblings and I played outdoors until we were called in to have dinner. When we celebrated birthdays it was the highlight of our childhood. Mom would bake a special cake for each of us for our birthday. We did not have a great deal of money during this time, but we found joy just being with the entire family. The money Mom and Dad made went into a fund to rebuild our family home. We never thought about struggles of the time. We just accepted the gifts of life with grace, love and joy.

Verona Schmidt

JOY: HOLIDAY TRADITIONS THROUGH TIME

The centerpiece of our family Christmas traditions is ***togetherness*** and that has brought us a tremendous amount of ***joy*** over so many of the past years! Our core family has grown to include 20 individuals spanning 3 generations and is spread over 4 states (PA, VA, FL, NM). And so, of course, over time, many of our holiday traditions have changed or evolved. The one tradition that has NOT changed is being together. It's the joy we experience when we're together that drives our desire, flexibility, effort, and faith in God's ever-present help that's required to make it happen year after year.

1958: The earliest childhood memories I have of my family's Christmas holiday traditions and the joy of being together take me back to our dairy farm in northwestern Pennsylvania, located about half way between Erie and Pittsburgh. By late December back then, long before global warming, the farm would be covered in a thick blanket of snow. Mom, Dad, my brother, 2 sisters and I always celebrated Christmas Eve with my Grandma and Grandad Flick at their home, which was just a few steps from our home. It was an idyllic setting...an old farm house with a wood-burning stove in the kitchen. Grandma usually had something delicious-smelling in the works...homemade bread or an apple or mincemeat pie in the oven...a pot of beef vegetable soup on the stove...homemade noodles left to dry on the dining room table. The annual Christmas Eve gathering included 3 generations...our core group of 8, along with the aunts, uncles, cousins who lived nearby. We cousins would "sled ride" on the hill behind Grandma's and Grandad's house, build a snowman and then a couple snow forts so that we could have an epic snowball fight, all before sunset. Inside, the adults were preparing the food that was an important part of our celebration, including my Mom's homemade chocolate fudge and my Grandma's BIG molasses and buttery popcorn balls.

After an early dinner we would attend the candlelight Christmas Eve service at our church. As a child, it was difficult for me to sit quietly during the service, knowing there were gifts to exchange back at Grandma's and Grandad's house. The gifts were small but were either handcrafted or carefully chosen for each other and were usually sweet surprises. First came the "ooohs" and "ahhhs" as we opened our gifts, then a few groans about having to do a thorough clean-up of the wrapping paper and ribbon while being careful not to throw away someone's gift. Finally, we got to enjoy some time with each other trying out the new toys and maybe learning a new game. Eventually Mom, Aunt Doris and Grandma would take turns reminding us that, until we went to bed, Santa would not be delivering any presents that night. It was so difficult to put away the toys and end the fun! But then...

Shhhh!!! Listen!! What was that??? Are those sleigh bells jingling somewhere outside??? It must be Santa Claus!!! We've gotta go!!! We've gotta get to bed!!! We would jump up, pull on boots, grab coats, hats, scarves, mittens, run out the door, stumble down the path cut deep in the snow and race into our house. We were in "PJs" and had our teeth brushed in record time, all the while "praying" that there would be presents under the tree in the morning.

Years later, someone discovered in the barn, the set of sleigh bells that Dad had jingled as he ran around Grandma's and Grandad's house. Hearing those bells, we believed that Santa and his reindeer were close by, signaling it was most certainly bedtime! Ringing those sleigh bells was a smart trick that my Dad played on us but it also made for a number of exciting Christmas Eve get-togethers and has always been one of my favorite holiday memories.

Since those early Christmas Eve celebrations on the farm so much has changed, including where we celebrate. Grandma and Grandad passed away. Their house was torn down. As kids, we had thought that we would ALWAYS be going home to the farm but much to our dismay,

Mom and Dad made the right business decision to sell it. Mom and Dad then hosted our Christmas get togethers at their new home but...there were no sleigh bells. Now, my brother in Pennsylvania and my sister in Virginia take turns as our holiday hosts. At times, driving and flying long distances for holiday togetherness means counting on God to get us through blinding snow storms and to give us the patience to endure tiring traffic jams, flight cancellations and delays.

As our family has grown, we've added traditions from other cultures. My Italian-American sister-in-law introduced us to the Feast of the Seven Fishes as a Christmas Eve tradition that we still observe annually. My brother-in-law incorporates Jewish blessings into our meal time prayers and leads the lighting of the menorah when Hanukkah and Christmas holidays overlap.

Our inclusion of gift-giving during our holiday get togethers has also changed over the years. We've had fun several times by having a "white elephant" gift exchange. Now, gifts are given only to the young children in our family. The rest of us consider the time we spend together during the holidays to be the most precious gift we can give each other.

When we meet in Pennsylvania, holiday group activities still include building snowmen, snowball fights and sledding, as long as the weather cooperates. But if there's no snow or we're in southern Virginia, bowling gets added. Wherever we are, we also have fun piling into a couple of vans, touring local neighborhoods to see holiday light displays, while eating snacks, of course, and singing a few Christmas carols along the way.

Food remains an important element of our holiday get togethers. We have continued to use some of Grandma Flick's and Mom's holiday recipes...orange cookies, peanut butter blossoms, peanut brittle, sweet potato soufflé, popcorn balls to name a few. What I notice and relish, is that absolutely everyone in our core family loves to cook and that preparing our meals together is just as much fun as eating together.

Yes, we've been fortunate to experience much holiday joy for so many years. However, several times, during the holidays, we experienced tremendous sadness and loss. In 2008, we were all together but those Christmas holidays were also my Mom's last few days life. On December 13, 2014, we lost my sister-in-law. After being together for the celebration of her life on December 21, we went back to our respective homes to mourn and to remember her. During both those difficult times we relied on God's presence and His promise that He would guide us and comfort us.

2024: This year, we'll meet in northwestern Pennsylvania, at my brother's home, near where our Flick family Christmas traditions began. Our group will be 18 so we'll set up a ZOOM call while we're together to include our 2 Key West, Florida family members who can't make it to PA this year. We've planned dinner menus, made flight reservations, booked rental cars, and reserved an Air B&B to house half of our group. Yes, some of our traditions have changed and the make-up of our family has changed, but by the grace and the gifts of God, the joy of being together remains.

-Victoria Flick

Joy:

What a year we have had. The world seems to be wallowing in hate and anger. How can you find joy in these times? Suspicion and fear dominate interactions between strangers. Traffic issues become attempted homicides. An incorrect order leads to a fistfight. Over and over again.

What's so funny about peace, love, and understanding?

Where is Joy?

Being touched by the love of God, our hearts will naturally radiate Joy.

We surround ourselves with candles and strings of light to help us

express Joy. But true Joy is spread through an embrace, an understanding look into another's eyes or in the unity of prayer and praise. We must carry our gift of Joy into the world to spread acceptance, understanding, compassion, forgiveness and so much more. Long ago a babe in a manger radiated Joy and unconditional love, understanding and forgiveness. As Christians, we have a responsibility to reach deep into our hearts to find Joy and to allow Joy to lead us to model Christ. [Because] the hopes and fears of all the years are met in [Him] tonight.

With Joy,
Paige Furlano

Joy in a time of adversity:

As many of you know, in August two years ago I was diagnosed with the most virulent form of breast cancer. Since it does not run in my family and I had no symptoms, I was shocked.

We immediately began both chemo and immune therapies. I developed sores all over my body. My mouth had blisters on the tongue, pallet and lips. I awakened Christmas Eve to discover that all my hair had fallen out - even my eyelashes! This was not a good time in my life yet I look back with amazement. My husband of fifty years was not a patient man, but he became the most extraordinary caregiver I could ever imagine. He cooked, cleaned, did the laundry, and graced every day with loving ways to make me feel better. Never-not once! - did he get cross or raise his voice with I asked him to do something. In every way he showed me his love and concern and he brought me genuine joy with his thoughtful deeds. If I hadn't become ill, I never would have seen this side of his love.

Another way I experienced joy at this time was in the post-op when my surgeon told me that she had found no cancer, only scar tissue! The terrible chemicals which had ravaged my body had killed all the cancer!

I was cancer free! Boy, did I ever feel true joy in that moment, and every day since.

I also felt joy throughout the journey. I am not a good patient and I do not want to receive guests when I am not at my best. Many of you respected my wishes and stayed away. But almost daily I received so many cards and calls and flowers and goodies for my friends at RRPC! I had constant reminders that my church family cared for me, was praying for me, and loved me. That joy carried me through some difficult days and warmed my heart.

It is possible to find joy in difficult times when we open our hearts to God's love around us. It is important to look for that joy within ourselves and in the people we meet in our life. It is vital that we remember our Heavenly Father wants us to find joy even in the difficult times when adversity seems the greatest factor in our daily life.

Linda Maddux

Hopes and Fears of All the Years- JOY:

In the early 1950's our family struggled financially. There were no food banks and I remember eating a lot of rice. We had oatmeal every morning. I know we kids hoped our lives would improve as we got older. A neighbor hired me to dust and vacuum for 25 cents an hour. I had money. Oh Joy, Joy, Joy!

At Christmas I bought an assortment of small boxes of cereal and wrapped them in paper and bows and put them in everyone's cereal bowls on Christmas morning. What a treat!

For over 70 years I have done this, although we can now afford anything we want for breakfast. It is a reminder for us to think of those who don't have enough.

Our traditions have come and gone as we grew, moved and aged, but this one remains. Our children don't do it, but they have learned to be generous. Traditions are a good way to teach values. As we think of our traditions, what values are they teaching? Hopefully they are Christian

values. It's good to review them to see why we do them and what are they teaching.

Prayer:

Our Father in heaven,

Thank you for providing for us...even more than our earthly fathers can.

Help us to realize that our wealth is not "normal" compared to the rest of the world. Amen.

-Genevieve Dykehouse

JOY:

As we sing and hum the words in some of our favorite songs - think about JOY and gladness.

Glory to God Presbyterian Hymnal:

Joy to the World, p 134

Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee, p 611

Raise a Song of Gladness - Jubilate Deo, p 155

Bible References (NIV):

Psalms 28:7 ... My heart leaps for joy.

Psalms 100:1-3 ... Come before Him with joyful songs.

2 Corinthians 2:3 ... I had confidence in all of you, that you would share my joy.

Philippians 1:19-26 ... I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith.

Fill in the blanks of JOY song verses with these 24 words. Enjoy the challenge.

bird, blessing, fountain, gladness, grace, hills, light, joy, joy, King, Lord, music, onward, peace, peace, plains, rocks sadness, sin, sing, strife, sunward, truth, world

1. Joy to the _____, the _____ is come.

2. Heaven and nature _____.

3. Let earth receive her _____.

4. He comes to make his _____ flow.

5. Fields and floods, _____, _____ and _____
repeat the sounding _____.
6. He rules the world with _____ and _____.
7. Melt the cloud of _____ and _____.
8. Giver of immortal _____, fill us with the _____ of day.
9. Chanting _____ and flowing _____ call us to rejoice in
thee.
10. Ever singing, march we _____, victors in the midst of
_____.
11. Joyful _____ leads us _____ in the triumph song of
_____.
12. Christ has come bringing _____ and _____ to every
heart.

Sharon Rae Hovey

WEEK FOUR: Holy Disruptions – LOVE

HYMNS: Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus (82), Of the Father's Love Begotten (108), While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks (117)

Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 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 in the guest room. Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 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!" When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them, and Mary treasured all these words and

pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them.

Isaiah 9:2-6

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.
You have multiplied exultation; you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder.

For the yoke of their burden and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.
For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders, and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Holy Disruptions:

I guess that I have lived an uneventful life because any disruptions – Christmas or otherwise – have been few and far between. The one that comes to mind, it must be remembered, is told from the viewpoint of a young child growing up in Michigan; I was at an age when even the slightest disruption is traumatic and significant.

I was told that we – my parents and younger sister and I – would be spending the holidays visiting an aunt and uncle in Ohio. Outwardly I was very excited, but inside I was troubled: would Santa be able to find us so far from home? A holiday disruption, if ever I saw one.

My parents, of course, were not going to let our vacation stand in the way of their children's good time, and they had made previous arrangements, sending gift lists to our relatives ahead of time. So when

Christmas morning rolled around, we were thrilled to notice that Santa had located us anyway. My young Christmas had been saved.

Today disruptions come in many shapes and sizes and can be much more distressing, regardless of one's age. But somewhere there is a Santa who will step up to assure us that all will be well. Somehow, we will be able to put this behind us and continue on our journey, be it Akron or Bethlehem.

-Thom Hinks

Love:

Chuck and I had not been married for long and we were living in Rochester, NY. It was getting close to Christmas and we wanted to see both our families. His folks lived in Buffalo - two hours to the west. My folks lived in Boston - six hours to the east. We had two cats so did not want to be away more than two days. How were we going to make this work? There were more relatives living near his folks than mine so a visit before Christmas Day would work for Buffalo and Christmas Day itself with my folks. We traveled to Buffalo the weekend before Christmas and spent two days there enjoying time with extended family. Back to Rochester for three days at home. Then to Boston one day before Christmas with a return on Christmas night.

We arrived home about 3 am on December 26 in clear cold weather. After a bit of sleep we got up about 7 and looked outside to a surprisingly beautiful winter wonderland. Between 3 am and 7 am there was an intense lake effect snow storm - there was three feet of snow! For many this was a work day but not for us. We were able to go out and enjoy this wondrous weather without any concerns for shoveling or driving. It was pure joy and delight.

PRAYER:

Dear Lord, our lives are filled with unexpected disruptions or changes to our expectations. May you help us take it all in stride and savor the

uniqueness in each of these occurrences. Let us be as children embracing the wonder of our days in your care. Amen.

-Hazel Lathrop

Holy Disruptions – LOVE:

Telling a story of a holy disruption in my life...How did I cultivate a readiness for surprise and prepared to be amazed instead of afraid? In early January 1984, I began my drive south on an early snowy morning from Los Alamos, NM headed to Kingsville, TX for graduate school studies at Texas A&I University now known as Texas A&M Kingsville. I had accepted a research assistant position with a focus on range & wildlife management and I was unsure what to expect in the small town of Kingsville. A note on what is 'range & wildlife management'... a study and resulting thesis paper on cattle grazing operations and how they affect ground nesting birds. My graduate studies and assistantship began mid-January and were progressing well in the first semester. As field studies began in late spring, I moved off campus to a trailer park. During the spring and summer months, I commuted up the Texas coast to my field study site. I often commuted throughout the fall for course studies, which came with field studies. During late spring, I met a fella who lived in the trailer next door as he was sitting on his truck tailgate playing his guitar.

Well, this is south Texas and a young man sitting on his truck tailgate and playing country music on his guitar caught my eye. I pursued the relationship during the spring and summer and into the early fall. During the fall semester, my professor noted that my work was falling off and asked what was going on?

I panicked! Whoa! I was really into this relationship, but where was it headed? Was I going to complete my studies or go down an arduous path with this guitar playing man? My panic continued! I considered staying in South Texas during the Christmas/New Year holiday instead

of visiting my mom and family in New Mexico. Another round of panic...what was I doing with my life?

In the fall I began attending Catholic mass, because it was quiet and contemplative. Praying for guidance led to the beginning of peace in my heart. Continuing my prayers for guidance, a Dolly Parton song was playing on the radio and realizing she was singing directly to me! Wow! I sat up with a clear focus on my life's direction. Then I knew it was time to leave this relationship to pursue my Christmas holiday with family in New Mexico and continue my graduate studies. I wasn't intentionally cultivating a readiness for surprise, but with prayer, the Dolly Parton song did surprise me. Her song got my attention. Reflecting on my prayers for guidance, I realized the song brought both comfort and amazement to me. Soon my panic began to fade, and I let the amazing feeling of relief guide me to a renewed direction. It was then that I knew I had not heard her song before and to this day, I have yet to hear this song again. This was truly a holy discovery (and disruption) in my life that continued to guide me along my journey.

Denise Baker

Do Not Be Afraid:

"Do not be afraid." Did you know that this is the most frequently repeated message in Scripture? More than 300 times. I don't know how not to be afraid right now. Some of my fears are personal: I have a trans son who is also schizophrenic, and lives on Social Security, Medicaid and Medicare. Without his meds, he descends into mental illness, and I am afraid for his personal safety in the face of anti-trans propaganda. I have a daughter whose bodily autonomy is threatened by men who now feel they have permission to say "Your body, my choice". And she is married to a Singaporean Muslim who was planning to try to emigrate to the U.S., but now will probably not even visit, because it is too risky for him.

In each of the stories from Scripture in this devotional, an angel appears bringing a message of something new that will happen, and telling the recipient of the message not to be afraid. An angel appears to Zechariah telling him his aged wife will bear a son, John the Baptist. An angel appears to Mary, a teenager, telling her she will bear a son who will be the Son of God. She is told not to be afraid, when she literally has everything to be afraid of. And an angel appears to Joseph, who was planning to divorce the pregnant Mary, but the angel tells him that the son she will give birth to will be the savior of his people.

Note that “Do not be afraid” in these stories doesn’t mean - Do not be afraid because there is nothing to be afraid of. Nor does it mean, do not be afraid because everything is going to be all right. No. Both John and Jesus, whose births were foretold by these angels, lived lives that were filled with challenges and struggles, and then they were executed by the political powers of their day.

So how do we understand, “Do not be afraid”? What does it mean for us, here and now? This is how I try to make sense of it:

God is God - by definition, unknowable, beyond comprehension by us, mere humans. God is the Creator, who imbued their Creation with meaning and purpose - although we will never fully understand that meaning and purpose, we trust that there IS meaning and purpose to life, the universe and everything. And God became Incarnate in the life of a man whose teachings and example we are given to follow - and those teachings are clear:

Feed the hungry, welcome the outsider, care for the poor, seek justice for those who are oppressed, be the peacemakers. Our faith does not promise a happy or easy life, free of worry and struggle. When God tells us not to be afraid, God is telling us, don’t let fear paralyze you, don’t hide away hoping to fly under the radar, don’t hoard your assets against an uncertain future. Don’t wait for a savior. Don’t wait for a light in the darkness. BE the light in the darkness. BE the safe place for those who are afraid. Create the Kingdom of God on earth. This is what we are called to be and do. This is the reason the Church exists.

So, do not be afraid. Instead, be filled with that calling, trusting that God is with us, working beside us, every step of the way.

Prayer: Creator God, we know that everything we are and everything we have is a gift from You. Help us to be worthy of those gifts. Fill us with your power so that we have the courage to do the work of creating your Kingdom. Be with us now as we strive to be the body of Christ in this time and in this place. Amen.

-Birgitta Gustafson