Christmas: God’s Gift for a Lifetime

2014 Advent Devotionals

Westminster Presbyterian Church
An Advent Season Prayer

This Advent season is so full
so crammed with human emotions –
the wondering anticipation of little children,
the joy and anxiety of parents,
the grinding loneliness of those fare from
family and home,
the glimmering hope of all who find
the meaning of their life laid in a humble manger,
the weariness and despair of those
who cannot believe the old, old story
and thus see only the false
and ugly aspects of our celebration.

Break in –
break in to all our lives this day, Lord Jesus.
Come to us as you came long ago,
in gentleness and tender vulnerability.
Evoke in all of us
that love which alone can save us,
and through us save the world.

In this season of giving and receiving,
we pause a moment to recall the gifts
you bless us with at Christmas.

(From Faces at the Manger, J. Barrie Shepherd)

“Christmas: God’s Gift for a Lifetime” is the theme of the 2014 Advent Devotional booklet. The Adult Ministry Committee is grateful to the many writers who shared their stories and thoughts about this most wonderful season. Our hope is that you will find inspiration and meaning as you read the devotions in this booklet, and perhaps they will trigger memories of gifts given and received.

May you be blessed as you read an offering each day.

~Adult Ministry Committee, 2014
November 30  

Gifts from God

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases;  
God’s mercies never come to an end.  
They are new every morning.

The Lord God gave the peoples of the earth a garden,  
and the people said: “That’s very nice, God, but that’s not enough. We’d like a little knowledge, please.”
The Lord God gave them knowledge,  
And the people said, “Now that we have knowledge, we’d like things.
The Lord God gave the people things,  
but they always said, “That’s not quite enough.”
So the Lord God gave them gifts unequaled:  
the sun  
lightning and thunder  
rain and flowers  
animals and birds and fish  
trees and stars and the moon.  
God gave them the rainbow.  
God parted the Red Sea and gave them manna.  
God gave them prophets  
and children  
and each other,  
but still the people said, “That’s no quite enough.”
God loved the people,  
and out of ultimate merciful goodness  
God gave them the Gift of Gifts,  
a Christmas present never to be forgotten.  
God gave them love  
in the form of God’s son,  
even Christ Jesus.

There are some that don’t open their eyes  
or their ears or their hearts  
and they still say, that’s not quite enough.  
They wander through the stores looking for Christmas.  
But others open their whole being to the Lord,  
bending their knees to praise God,  
carrying Christmas with them every day.  
For these the whole world is a gift!

Kneeling in Bethlehem, by Ann Weems

December 1

A Gift for a Lifetime Matthew 7:11  
New International Version (NIV)

“If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!”

If you were to give your children a gift to last their entire lifetime, what would it be?

Some Christmas gifts do not last very long. A child might be bored with a Christmas toy by that afternoon. But other gifts might have a long and useful life. A pair of sturdy boots can last, provided that your feet aren’t still growing. But what kind of gift lasts for a whole lifetime?

Perhaps a musical instrument might last a person’s whole life. They might outgrow a specific instrument but you could give the lifelong appreciation of music.

You could give a book. You won’t outgrow a book like you might a pair of pants, but the books that appeal to you when you’re young may not hold the same appeal as you grow older.

Or perhaps it could be a different kind of gift... an education, a good work ethic, wisdom, or even love. A happy home and warm memories can be a gift that lasts a lifetime.

What specific gifts has God given you that have lasted for a lifetime? Ask God to help you think of what he has given you. Write them down. Thank God for the gifts He has given.

~John Mortenson
December 2

Sharing God-given Gifts

For quite some time, longer than I care to admit, I’ve felt a nudge to reach outside the church & our missions to do something for someone else, to give of myself in a different way. That does not mean I do not want to continue to do work within our church. It’s just a nudge to reach out, to use my God-given talents to help someone else.

So I finally heeded the nudge and signed up to be a volunteer tutor with Reading Connections. I quickly learned that the gift of my self has turned into a gift to me! Each week I look forward to meeting with my students. They are immigrants from various countries around the world, and they are simply wonderful. These ladies and men desire to learn to read, write and speak English better than they currently do. Consequently they are exceptionally motivated. They thirst for knowledge and try so hard to learn new concepts and words. We have such a good time. We laugh over humorous mispronunciations. We share special events in our lives, such as births and getting a driver’s license or going to vote for the first time. They call me “teacher,” yet they are grown men and women just like me. These women and our time together have become a special gift to me, one of the best I’ve ever received.

So, don’t wait too long to acknowledge a nudge you are feeling. Who knows, it may turn out to be the best gift you ever received!

~Daphne Haverkamp

December 3

Christmas Gifts

I enjoy wrapping gifts. Making the gift special with the outer wrapping is part of the fun. First, I use colored tissue paper to surround the gift. Then the outer wrapping paper can be so creative. Great colors or maybe some glitter on the paper can make a gift look so fancy. I really love feeling the texture and the weight of the paper. That is why I have favorite brands of wrapping paper.

And of course there is beautiful ribbon. I love the double sided and wire edged ribbon the best. It makes a beautiful bow which can be fluffed again if the bow gets crushed when taking gifts to work or to gatherings of friends or family. Or there is curling ribbon. Not just one strand but putting lots of strands together of several colors and then curling it to make a beautiful cluster on the top of a box or the side of a bag. A beautiful outer package begins to tell the recipient look carefully, this is a special gift.

And then I ponder God’s gifts to me every day. If I only recognize gifts with beautiful paper or great ribbon, I will miss many of the wonderful gifts from God available to me every day. A sunrise, a new day, people all around, a friend saying, "I am praying for you." - priceless gifts!

Prayer: Dear God, we are so used to celebrating Christmas with gifts in beautiful packages. Help me to remember that you give good gifts to me every day. Thank you for being present in my life. Fill me with the gift of your Spirit today. Amen.

~Terri Burleson

December 4

Re-gifting? Please do!

II Corinthians 9:15 Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

In the history of the world there has never been a gift that was more amazing, incredible, and long lasting than the birth of Jesus. By graciously accepting this gift, we become the recipients of redemption, peace, forgiveness and unconditional love. This eternal gift will never, wear out, break or grow old. It is a gift of a lifetime! Although it can be difficult to re-gift something we like or enjoy, preferring instead to re-gift that ugly tie, or the watermelon scented body lotion, the gifts of the Christ are re-giftable and sustainable.

Few are the gifts that when given away leave us with an even greater abundance! But so it is. So re-gift the love! Re-gift the peace! Re-gift the forgiveness! Offer these gifts to everyone! Not just on Christmas day, but every day!

You’ll be glad you did, and so will He!

~Rebecca Austin Williams
December 5

“The Gift of the Baby Jesus”

Well, it’s time to “put the Christ back in Christmas”; time to celebrate the baby King’s birth; time to remember the miracle and celebrate the continued promise and presence of Christ in our lives. But haven’t we each experienced in our lives a Jesus that seemed elusive. Haven’t we each experienced a Jesus that seemed to go away, or seemed to be hiding from us, or maybe who seemed to not be there at all. But maybe we’re not looking in the right places for the hope of nations in a God who cares so much for us that He became one of us in the form of innocence.

See, the treasure on this quest is not just the baby. The treasure is who the baby will be, what the baby will do, and what the baby will mean for all people for all eternity: a gift, a symbol of salvation, a sign of the covenant, a king, a resting place, a starting over, a rebirth.

The nativity is an angel choir crying out for each one of us to seek the Messiah who is nearby to us. It’s a calling to follow the signs into the midst of the least in order to find the greatest. It’s a command to come and adore Him, while He reveals His goodness and Godliness to us. It’s going, going and searching because we just can’t wait. It’s moving something to discover or rediscover what we need to find. It’s finding Jesus in our lives and being forever changed because of it. He’s not hiding; follow the clues. He wants to be seen, to be found, in a stable or on the street.

A few years ago at the beginning of Advent, we told Jossalyn that we were going to have a Live Nativity out in the field behind our house with real animals and real people. And for two weeks prior to it she kept saying, “I can’t wait to see the real baby Jesus, dad!” And I say to you what I said to her, “I can’t either. I can’t wait till you, and I, and everyone in the world sees the real baby Jesus.” Maybe for the first time, or maybe again, I cannot wait until the puzzle begins to take shape, until what was lost is found, until we find or uncover what we have waited for, what we go in search of. I cannot wait until we see the real baby Jesus in our lives. The Nativity awaits.

~Sam Perkins

December 6

“Welcome to Our World”

John 5:11-12  God gave us eternal life; the life is in his Son. So, whoever has the Son, has life; whoever rejects the Son, rejects life.

“Fragile fingers sent to heal us,
Tender brow prepared for thorns,
Tiny heart whose blood will save us;
Unto us is born, Unto us is born.”

Without Christmas, we can’t have Easter. I know few of us think about Easter at Christmas time, but in my daily devotional reading today, the verse from 1 John prompted me to remember both the gift from God (Jesus) as well as the gift of God (eternal life).

As a believer, I know that the birth of Christ and accepting Christ as my Savior is the best Christmas present I ever received. Christmas has always been my favorite holiday. When I was much younger, Christmas was a time for gathering around a huge meal and opening presents. I do not remember when I accepted Christ as my Savior; I wish I did. I am envious of people who know the exact date when Christ entered their life. I know that Christ has been the center of my Christmas for as far back as my memory will take me.

I first attended Westminster the Christmas following my North Carolina Presbyterian weekend in October 1998. This was the first time I heard the song “Welcome to Our World”, made popular by Christian artist Chris Rice. The song was sung at the contemporary worship service at Westminster by Flay Blalock. I remember listening to the lyrics and feeling overwhelmed with emotion.

For me, the gift of Jesus at Christmas, reminds me to remember Easter also. Accepting the gift of eternal life from a baby born on Christmas Day is a choice anyone can make. My choice is to welcome Jesus to my world.

Prayer: Loving God, Help each of us remember your gift of eternal life is ours to receive by accepting the Christ child’s birth, death, and resurrection. Amen.

~Jan Parker
December 7

The Church Year

The church is Advent.
The unwrapping of God’s greatest gift is near.
Advent – coming.
God will take away the tinsel
and decorate our human hearts in hope
so that Christians can sit laughing in the rain,
knowing that the Lord is going to
shine in upon their being.

For no matter how long the darkness,
God will send the light.

In spite of cursing and violence and the massacring
of human dignity,
we will dance in the streets of Bethlehem,
for He will be born!

The church is Epiphany.
We are the Magi, searching,
resplendent in this world’s accouterments
of knowledge and wealth and achievement.
But we search for something more.
And of all unlikely places –
in a stable
the Deity appears.
The borning of our Lord
bursts in upon our ordinary lives
like fireworks in the snow.

Excerpt from Kneeling in Bethlehem by Ann Weems

December 8

The Gift of Time to be Thankful

Philippians 4: 6-7

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every-
thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving
let your requests be made known to God. And the
peace of God which surpasses all understanding will
guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Twenty-five years ago I found a small lump after
spending a Friday afternoon by the pool in my apart-
ment complex. After what seemed like a very long
weekend I was examined by my physician. Test re-
sults showed nothing significant; and I was told to
check back in 6 months. My physician persisted;
and I trusted his instincts to set up an appointment
with the surgeon’s office. Subsequently a biopsy was
immediately scheduled for the day after my 30th
birthday.

I celebrated my 30th on Thursday by going danc-
ing with a group of friends. The next day I went in
for my biopsy without much concern about a cancer
diagnosis. I remember the surgeon’s eyes as he told
me the results. Surgery, chemotherapy, and radia-
tion followed; along with love and support from my
family, church family, friends, and co-workers.

Since this time I’ve met and married my sup-
portive husband and became a stepmom to my won-
derful stepson. I’ve seen nieces and nephews born
and watched them grow up. I have received these
and many more blessings than I can ever begin to
count. As odd as it sounds, I remember thanking
God for this journey of healing so that I could see
His love shining through others He’s placed in my
path.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, In this busy time of
the year help me to remember to give myself the gift
of time to be thankful for the many blessings that
you have placed in my life right here, right now;
trusting in you to take care of the rest. Amen.

~Donna Weekly
December 9

Our One True Hope

Read: Scripture: Romans 5:1-5; Jeremiah 29:11

As a child, I developed a deep passion for music and dancing. One Christmas I informed my mother that I wanted a record player. Having chosen exactly what I wanted, I gave Mom the specific details to ensure that I would indeed receive the right one. Well, Christmas arrived, as did a record player; however, it was not the one I wanted — it was even better!

Another year, at Easter time, I searched relentlessly for my basket (Easter Bunny always hid them) but found it nowhere. My siblings and cousins, 10 in all, had found theirs but mine was still nowhere to be found. Believing that Easter Bunny had forgotten me, I began to cry when suddenly I spied a lumpy dishtowel on a kitchen chair. Upon closer inspection, I discovered my basket of goodies hidden beneath the towel.

These seemingly inconsequential childhood memories conveyed powerful messages of God’s love, grace and mercy many years later when Mom suffered with a prolonged illness. She and I began to engage in discussions of spiritual matters. During our talks she confided that she didn’t understand why her prayers often remain unanswered and that she feared death because she was uncertain of her destiny.

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, I began writing sermonettes to Mom. Quoting Luke 11:9, “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you.” I shared my belief that God does indeed answer all prayers; however, sometimes he answers in ways we don’t expect or recognize. I recounted the stories of the Christmas when I yearned for the record player and the Easter when I thought I had been forgotten. I shared that oftentimes we think we know what we want and what is best, as I did in my request for a record player, when what God elects to give us is much more valuable — just as the record player she gave me was so much more than I could ever have imagined or anticipated. I offered further that the answer to prayer is often before us and yet remains hidden because we fail to recognize it as I had failed to recognize my Easter basket under a lumpy dishtowel long ago.

In another sermonette, I addressed grace and justification by faith. Mom believed in God’s grace for others and grace to others, but struggled to accept it for herself. Grace was rarely spoken of in the Roman Catholic Church and, when it was mentioned, it was something to be earned, for God was a vengeful and punitive God who kept score. Sharing Ephesians 2:8-9, I expressed my belief that, contrary to what Mom was taught, God freely gave the ultimate gift of grace to all believers through the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. Yes, God’s grace was even a gift to her and there was nothing she could do to earn this grace or anything she could do that would result in God rescinding his grace. My prayer and hope was that she could accept God’s precious gift of grace for herself.

On Jan. 9, 2004, at 6 p.m., I spoke these words repeatedly to my mom who lay dying, unable to speak, in a hospital bed 500 miles away: “Mom, I love you. God loves you. It’s OK if you want to go Home. At 6:15 p.m., Mom went Home.

The word “hope” is mentioned 167 times in 169 verses in the NIV Translation, with 15 Hebrew or Aramaic derivatives and five Greek derivations. The Greek word translated as “hope” in Romans 5:4, elpis, refers to faith in what we cannot see or understand. Tiqvah, the Hebrew word translated as “hope” in Jeremiah 29, denotes expectation.

In this Advent season of hope, anticipation and expectation, may we be reminded of our one true hope … our Lord and savior Jesus Christ, for in him we live and move and have our being.

~Diana Koehler
December 10

Unselfish Giving

It was the Saturday night before Christmas in 2007. I was homebound following what I call “my fall with grace” through my attic on October 30th. I was recuperating from the surgery which fused my broken back together and waiting for my broken foot to heal. I had been blessed by a parade of Westminster brothers and sisters sending cards, bringing in food and staying with me the required 24/7 during the hours my husband had to work following my discharge from the hospital the day before Thanksgiving. I had also been a grateful recipient of the blood of life which saved my life while I lay in intensive care.

It had been quite a journey of unselfish giving by many, but the only additional thing I wanted that Christmas was the one thing I could not have – to be able to celebrate Christmas at a candlelight Christmas Eve service and hear my favorite hymn, O Holy Night, sung. I was sitting in the living room leaning on my walker when there was a knock at the front door. I heard my husband say, “Come on inside. She is in the living room.” In walked three of my high school friends, Louis Allen, Gary Mitchell, and Caren McPherson, and some of their family members. (I had reconnected with Caren and Louis when I began attending Westminster Church.) Within minutes the most beautiful a cappella version of “O Holy Night” was being sung directly to me in my own living room. God had sent Christmas to me in the form of human angels!

I imagine that my friend, Caren, who is now in heaven, is still singing with the angels. Thank you, Caren, for my most memorable Christmas!

~Claudia McCoy

December 11

Look Homeward Angel

Read Psalm 35:1-9

In the 1960’s, my father was pastor at a small church in a small mill town. While there, I became friends with Roger who was a member of our church and one of my classmates. Because I entered school at the 10th grade level and was considered an “outsider” by many of the other youth in the town, I found it very hard to make friends. But, there were a few who reached out to me. One of these was Roger. Roger was genuinely one of the nicest friends that I had in this town.

After graduating from high school, I went off to college and Roger was drafted into the military and was sent to Vietnam. Roger’s activity while in Vietnam was to take a dog, who had been trained to locate snipers, and go in front of a platoon as it made its way through the jungle. This was an extremely dangerous duty; and, based upon past history, was a duty in which soldiers doing it had a high fatality rate. I knew the chances of Roger surviving were not good. I prayed every day for Roger’s life to be spared.

At our church’s Christmas service on a Wednesday night in 1967, Roger, just recently being discharged, attended that service. He had survived. I would rank this as the best Christmas gift I remember ever getting - Roger’s survival. I still feel great gratitude for this gift.

~Andee Gable
December 12

The True Gift of Christmas

Read Philippians 2:5-10

Scripture tells us at the time of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, the angels rejoiced! Through the years, we’ve heard the Christmas story retold often from the points of view of Mary and Joseph, but have you ever considered what Jesus’ own feelings may have been? What must have it taken for Him to willingly set aside the glories of Heaven to be born a helpless babe to poor parents in an occupied land. He even did so knowing full well what the outcome would be and the price He would have to pay.

The world Jesus was born into was under oppressive Roman rule. The working poor struggled to make ends meet, put food on the table, and pay taxes. For many, the promised coming of the Messiah, the Redeemer, was their only glimmer of hope in a dreary existence.

In my own life, 1997 was a rather bleak year. I had finally left a bad marriage for my own safety, moved back to NC, started over again with a new job and a cramped apartment. I was struggling to put the pieces of my life back together. That Christmas Eve my parents invited me to their house for dinner so I wouldn’t be alone, but in the midst of their friends celebrating, I felt even more lonely. All the merriment and jollity only magnified the pain I was feeling inside.

I really wanted to attend the 11 pm Christmas Eve service at the church where I’d grown up, but no one else did, so I went alone. As comforting as it was to be in the candle lit sanctuary, I was a bundle of emotions. You see, this was the same church where I had spoken my marriage vows seven years earlier. I felt as if I’d never be able to stop my tears from flowing, much less ever be happy again.

During the service, these words resonated with me in a way they never had before: “Christ was born into a broken, suffering world.” Here I was, broken and suffering. I realized the reason Christ came was for people like me, to bring hope to the downtrodden and brokenhearted. Not for the rich and the powerful, but for the lonely, the poor, the disheartened, the ones whose hearts are open to receive Him: the true Gift of Christmas.

As the service concluded at midnight, worshippers departed and bid each other “Merry Christmas”. As I made my way silently back to my car, I lifted my face to the cold night sky, only to feel against my cheeks, not tears, but the soft brush of snowflakes just beginning to fall. It was a like a gentle kiss from Heaven, from the One who loves me more than I can comprehend. The one who laid aside the riches of Heaven to be born in a stable. For me. For you. For us.

~ Laura Allred

December 13

The Christmas Pageant

The pageant was to be performed by the young children of the church. The director was accustomed to working with children but there was one 6 year old boy who was a “handful.” He daydreamed during rehearsals and couldn’t remember a single line, so the director gave him the role of a wise man. The role required no speaking: all the boy had to do was walk up to the manger, look at baby Jesus, and place his "gifts of gold" on the ground. Surely, the director thought, even HE couldn’t mess THAT up.

That Christmas Eve, the performance was without a hitch. When it was time for the wise men, the first two wise men performed their parts, but when the 6 year old boy looked in at baby Jesus, he dropped his "gold" on the floor with a loud crash. The church became very quiet. His eyes wide, the little boy turned around to the congregation and, with shocked expression, exclaimed, "He's ALIVE! Jesus is ALIVE!"

During rehearsals, a baby doll had been used to stand in for Jesus, but on the night of the performance, they used an actual newborn. Of course the boy hadn't been paying attention so when he saw a real baby in the manger, it seemed like a miracle.

It is easy to look at Jesus birth as a miracle, but his resurrection was even more miraculous. It can be easy to forget that we worship a savior who still lives today. Our Redeemer lives!

~ John Mortenson
December 14

The Gift of Earthly “Angels”

Wouldn’t it be wonderful
  if Advent came filled with angels and alleluias?
Wouldn’t it be perfect
  if we were greeted on these December mornings
    with a hovering of heavenly hosts
      tuning their harps and brushing up on their fa-la-las?
Wouldn’t it be incredible
  if their music filled our waking hours
    with the promise of peace on earth
      and if each Advent night we dreamed of
        nothing but goodwill?
Wouldn’t we be ecstatic
  if we could take those angels shopping,
    or trim the tree or have them hold our hands
      and dance through our houses decorating?
And, oh, how glorious it would be
  to sit in church next to an angel
    and sing our hark-the-heralds!
What an Advent that would be!
What Christmas spirit we could have!
An angel-filled Advent has so many possibilities!
But in lieu of that,
  perhaps we can give thanks
    for the good earthly joys we have been given
      and for the earthly “angels” that we know
        who do such a good job of filling
          our Advent with alleluias!

From “Angel-Filled Advent”
Kneeling in Bethlehem, by Ann Weems

December 15

The Perfect Gift

My daughters were unusually excited about their gift for me, I could tell. I unwrapped the box slowly and took out what looked to be a deck of cards. On the top of the deck, pasted to the familiar red Bicycle card, read a handwritten message -- “52 Things We Love about Mom.”

As I looked through the deck, I found that each card was numbered and had its own message. Some were hilarious – “You may not be the best singer, but you always sing it out loud.” Some hit a little too close to home – “You text with your index finger (and it’s funny.)” Some were reaffirming -- “You like our friends and they like you.” And some were incredibly touching -- “You’re always there for us.”

I knew right away that this was, beyond a doubt, the best Christmas gift I had ever received. I felt peaceful and deeply treasured. For about two hours.

Then, being the neurotic person that I am, my hamster-wheel brain kicked in and start spinning anxiously. One card read, “You emphasize education (but not too much.)” Hmmm, I worried, am I not making a big enough deal about school? Are they goofing off? WHAT ABOUT COLLEGE? Then there was this card: “You aren’t too strict.” Am I not strict enough? Are they getting away with stuff I don’t know about? AM I A BAD MOTHER?

And so it went, all of my doubts and ego and human weaknesses finding a way to turn this beautiful gift into a cause for worry. Why is it so hard to receive the gift of love?

As I reflect on this Christmas gift a year later, I realize that it’s the same with God’s love, which is truly the perfect gift. I make it so much harder than it has to be. This season, I will try to breathe deeply, quiet the inner voices and open up to let that love, available always, warm me and bring peace.

~Ann Morris
The Gift of the Word

“Holy words of our faith handed down to this age
Came to us through sacrifice; O heed the faithful words of Christ.”

-- From the hymn “Ancient Words” by Lynn DeShazo

One day this fall I began counting the number of Bibles I have in my various bookshelves at home. “One, two, three ...”. When I got to a baker’s dozen I decided to stop! Too many Bibles? Maybe, maybe not. I think about what each Bible has meant to me in my life, in my spiritual development. Sometimes I needed a bit more clarity, sometimes perhaps a bit more insight.

My first “gift” Bible is not even on a bookshelf. The little New Testament with Psalms and Proverbs that my first church gave me is safely tucked in a box and I continue to treasure it as my first!

As a teenager, I asked my parents for a new Bible one Christmas. I think they were surprised, but perhaps delighted too. This was a special Bible – “The Marked Reference Bible”, with verses about salvation marked in red, the Holy Spirit in green, temporal blessings in gold, and prophetic subjects in blue. It was a King James Version and I did use it quite heavily, trying to understand the words of the Kings’ English. It was indicative of my spiritual growth that my parents gave me “The Living Bible” paraphrase a Christmas or two later!

Now I buy my own Bibles, it seems. Since becoming a participant in various Bible studies over the years, including my favorite – Disciple Bible Study – I have sought detailed study Bibles where, although it is the Scripture itself that is authoritative, I have gained insight from various editorialists with who I sometimes argue! My favorite study Bibles are the New Oxford Annotated Bible (NRSV), the Jerusalem Bible (a French Roman Catholic translation with editorial notes from the “Church Fathers”), and the Archaeological Study Bible (NIV) where I learned so much about the geography and culture of Bible times.

With the Bible, the more translations I read, the closer I feel to understanding God’s meaning and desires for me. Truly, whether you receive the Bible as a gift (and Christmas is an appropriate time!) or you gift yourself from time to time, the Bible is the living Word, a gift that truly keeps on giving!

Prayer: God, thank you for the Word, and give me a new insight into how your Word might affect my life, and those around me, with the hope you provide. Amen.

~Mike Maynard
Gifts That Reflect Love

When I was a child my grandmother gave me a Raggedy Ann doll that she made by hand. It is now faded and a bit ragged, but is (basically) still in one piece. My grandmother was a farmer’s wife, an expert cook, seamstress and housekeeper. She took pride in creating the best yeast rolls from scratch, crocheting afghans and sewing Raggedy Ann and Andy dolls. She made one for each of us grandkids when we were young and, in my mind, my Raggedy Ann still represents her love for me.

When my son was born, my grandmother was 82. I asked her whether she would be willing to make a Raggedy Andy for him. She eagerly took on the challenge. When Raggedy Andy arrived, the stitching was not quite as tight as it had been on mine, but it was still beautiful to me as a symbol of my grandmother’s love for my son. When my middle daughter’s Raggedy Ann arrived, the stripes on the legs went the wrong way, but it was still made with love and so I treasured it. When my youngest daughter was born, my grandmother was 89 and she still made her a Raggedy Ann. The hair on the doll was thin and the doll was fragile, so when it came, I put it on a shelf in my daughter’s room to wait for her to grow up rather than let her play with it. My youngest daughter was the last great-grandchild to get a Raggedy Ann that was hand made by my grandmother. But even now, at 96, when another great-grandchild arrives, she makes sure she gives them a Raggedy Ann or Andy (they are now bought from a lady in her church).

If you have ever had a Raggedy Ann or Andy, then you may know a secret about them. If you undress them, there is often a heart stitched on their chest. The dolls for my children have “I love you” stitched in the heart. To me, the Raggedy Ann and Andy dolls are valued as symbols of my grandmother’s love, for me and for my children. My grandmother lives in a nursing home in Iowa, so my children have only seen her once or twice, but even though they really don’t know her, the dolls reflect her love for them. I remind them occasionally about the wonderful lady (their great-grandmother) who made the dolls for them.

We have never seen God, but he has given us many gifts that reflect his love and help us see him in our world today. I can’t help but think of God when I see a beautiful sunset, watch waves crash on the shore, admire a view from the Blue Ridge Parkway or meet a newborn for the first time. As we give and receive gifts this holiday season, let’s remember the love for each other that is reflected in the gifts and also remember the love that God has for us that is reflected in the gifts that he has given us, especially in the gift of his son.

~Cindy White
December 18
Generous and Perfect

The author of the Letter of James declared that

"Every generous act of giving, with 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

"Generous and perfect" - Isn't that what much of the holiday scramble is about these days? It is the sort of gift we'd all like to give or maybe even receive.

Of course, "generous and perfect" is open to interpretation. When I was about six or seven years old I thought that if only I had a box of chocolate covered cherries I would pretty much own the world. I expressed this wish to friends and indulgent relatives who asked what I'd like for Christmas, hoping that maybe one of them would oblige.

Actually, several of them did. At the time neighbors were scattered and family didn't share my taste in candy. Suffice it to say that I haven't wanted - much less eaten - a chocolate covered cherry since about mid-January of that year.

So let's look at "generous and perfect" again. There's the story of a very old lady who, when she awoke each morning, would say to herself, "What? I'm still here?" And then she gave thanks for another day of life.

Those who have s suffered a sprained ankle or broken wrist, hospitalization or even just a bad (is there any other kind?) cold, are likely to be grateful, upon recovery, for the great gift to simply be able to function in ordinary ways.

When life throws a wicked curve, isn't it a generous and perfect gift to have the attention of those who care? And if it is time to celebrate, what about that serenade from our own Carl Webb, who has managed to call every member on every birthday for the last fourteen years. What a gift to give! What a gift to receive!

There are loving parents and spouses, precious children, dedicated workers, warm homes, good friends, and opportunities to serve. So the gifts abound, on and on, far beyond our ability to count.

And the very last gift that we receive - that of eternal life with Christ - is the most generous and the most perfect gift of all.

~ Barbara Avery
The Gift of Abundant Life

While thinking what I could contribute for an Advent devotion, I received the monthly newsletter of Shanti Nepal, a Christian community health and development organization which was started by a remarkable young man, Krishna Man Shakya. A radiant Christian and my dear brother in Christ, he gained valuable knowledge, skills, experience, and maturity while working in the large mission project which I directed from 1990-2000. This Nepali organization, which I encouraged him to start, has grown in remarkable ways and has had a significant impact not only in community development in remote rural areas, but in spreading the gospel—a gospel we all take too much for granted.

Although a number of the staff of Shanti (Peace) Nepal are friends and colleagues of my wife, Sue, and me, the devotion in the October Newsletter was written by another first generation Christian man whom I do not know—Prem (Love) Subba. As I read it, I immediately felt this message was appropriate for Advent and the meaning of Christ’s coming, not only for us who have known Him but for many who are hearing this message for the first time. I have made a few editorial changes so that the “second language” English can be understood, but have retained the word, “Devil”, as this is who he believes is “the thief”.

Text: John 10:10

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy: I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”

“Jesus was opening the mystery of life. There is life led by the Devil and life promised by Jesus himself. The Devil actually desires to lead our life into emptiness, which is destined for eternal destruction. That life is full of sickness, laziness, weakness, and hopelessness: it is unproductive and ultimately of no use for the glory of God. Such life is driven by the Devil who never wants people to have full life that is promised by Jesus. The abundant life has hope, strength, health and productiveness, which ultimately has full potential to help his/her self and others. This is the kind of life that comes through Christ. It is not possible to have it without believing and trusting and leaning on Christ.

As Christian community workers, we all must possess the abundant life that Jesus promised. This abundance of life must overflow from us and must be witnessed by the communities we serve. People will glorify our Father in heaven when they see the goodness and abundance of our lives.”

~Dick Harding
December 20

The Ultimate Gift

What a wonderful multi-layered theme. The celebration of the birth of Christ is, of course, the bedrock: the ultimate gift itself. This gift in the person of Jesus comes wrapped in its own layers of promise, hope, and the revelation of a God of love who asks nothing but that we love God by extending that love through service to one another, especially to the least of our sisters and brothers. To realize the promise of peace on earth we are asked only to reach out in love to all we encounter. To realize the gift of peace within ourselves requires simply that we rid our hearts of unwarranted suspicion, hatred, jealousy and greed and replace them with love, compassion, empathy and openness.

The gift has also continued through the ages as people of all religious persuasions as well as many who claim no faith, contemplate the meaning and extraordinary impact of this man of humble origins who spent his all-too-brief earthly ministry among the common people preaching, teaching, healing and serving. Were it not for that message of love and compassion proclaimed by the one we call "The Prince of Peace," would we have as many folks around the world ministering to suffering people in various circumstances through agencies such as Urban Ministry, Habitat for Humanity, Hospice and Palliative Care, shelters for victims of domestic abuse, prison ministries and Doctors Without Borders?

The selflessness of Jesus has inspired leaders of many faith traditions and sometimes it is good to go outside the confines of Christian culture to hear the message anew. In a 1941 essay entitled, "What Jesus Means to Me," Mahatma Gandhi, a Hindu, wrote, "I refuse to believe that there now exists or has ever existed a person that has not made use of his [Jesus] example to lessen his sins, even though he may have done so without realizing it. The lives of all have, in some greater or lesser degree, been changed by his presence, his actions, and the words spoken by his divine voice." Gandhi concluded his remarks with this: "I believe that he belongs not solely to Christianity, but to the entire world: to all races and people, it matters little under what flag, name or doctrine they may work, profess a faith, or worship a God inherited from their ancestors."

Christmas and its celebration of the birth of the Christ Child was a gift to all people for all time and its message continues to be manifested in new and unique ways as world circumstances in each age dictate. To use once again an overused cliché, it's the gift that keeps on giving.

~Dick Swanson
December 21

Star-Giving

What I’d really like to give you for Christmas is a star. . . .
Brilliance in a package, something you could keep in the pocket of your jeans or in the pocket of your being.
Something to take out in times of darkness, something that would never snuff out or tarnish, something you could hold in your hand, something for wonderment, something that would remind you of what Christmas has always meant: God’s Advent Light into the darkness of this world.
But stars are only God’s for giving, and I must be content to give you words and wishes and packages without stars.
But I can wish you life as radiant as the Star that announced the Christ Child’s coming, and as filled with awe as the shepherds who stood beneath its light.
And I can pass on to you the love that has been given to me, ignited countless times by others who have knelt in Bethlehem’s light.
Perhaps, if you ask, God will give you a star.

From *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, by Ann Weems

December 22

The Season for the Lonely

The Christmas Season, both the Spiritual and secular, is arguably the most festive time of the year. All around are lights and glitter, parties and pageants, shopping and baking, Cantatas and Candlelight Services.

Billions of people around the world are celebrating. But for the lonely, the broken-hearted, it is the loneliest time of the year. It is a reminder of the absence of something dear, something that is no longer. Joyful noises are all around, but for the lonely, there is a chilling silence.

How can anyone be alone when billions of people are celebrating? Sometimes the lonely cannot feel the love of the Holy Spirit because the pain is just too great. The dark has shadowed the Light.

As Christians, you are called by Christ, the very Reason we celebrate. Called to reach out, as one of the billions that are joyous lovers of the Season, to the lonely. You are commissioned as the Light of Christ to spend time showing the love that has blessed you. It is you, as the Light of Christ, which can make a difference for the lonely. Reach out of yourself, and with the Grace of God, the prayers of Christ, and the presence of the Holy Spirit, you can make a difference for one of the lonely during this glorious Christmas Season.

Remember the teachings of the Word of God:

Matthew 5:14-16

“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

~ Lisa Ganem
December 23

The Gift of Challenges

“Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Romans 15:13

Life is full of challenges. In fact, I have come to believe that God can use our challenges to help us find our life’s purpose and ultimately establish and ground our faith. This realization suggests to me that the most meaningful gifts I have received from God are the places with the most challenge. We’ve all heard the expression, “That which doesn’t kill us makes us stronger.” If we allow for God’s guidance, this is truth.

Most parents would say that their children are their greatest gifts. I would suggest the possibility that the challenges our children offer may be our greatest gifts. Let me share with you one of our family’s challenges that speaks to this truth. Our son, Rob has awakened every morning for the last 30 years facing a seizure disorder. He does so without complaint, whining, fear, or loss of hope. He continues to believe that he will drive a car some day, a wish for which all young men hope. He has endured medications, surgeries, experimental trials and countless tests because he has faith that something will make a difference for him. No prejudice on my part because I’m his Mom, but he is the bravest person I know and one of my greatest gifts.

His example continues to inspire and assure our family that God is in control. I’m the one who has questioned and argued with God about “why” and will probably on occasion continue to do so. But, all I have to do is watch Rob. His strength gives me a faith that I would never have had without him and his challenges. He and his attitude are a gracious gift to me. His challenge is met by the scripture Romans 12:12 - “Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, and persevere in prayer.” God is there and will help, if we only allow ourselves to listen.

So perhaps as we ponder Christmas this year and all the gifts of challenge that we face, we will realize that truly the greatest gift is Jesus Christ. He is our inspiration, our hope, our constant companion and our salvation. After all, he faced the ultimate challenge and prevailed.

Wishing each of you a joyous Christmas and God’s gift of challenges.

~Anne Hendrix

December 24

God’s Indescribable Gift

Sometimes it feels like a losing battle, keeping the spiritual significance of Christmas alive. From the days before Halloween onward, it seems, we’re being corralled into a “buying stuff” mentality. Black Friday paved the way for Cyber Monday. Thanksgiving Day is now becoming a shopper’s option, and Black Friday deals are being made available days—even weeks—in advance.

All of this reduces Christmas to nothing more than a retailer’s paradise. For people of faith, it is far more.

As years have passed, I appreciate more and more the giving of gifts rather than being on the receiving end. Of course, it is exciting to open a wrapped package, especially prepared for you, anticipating what’s inside. It’s likewise meaningful to discover a kind act done in your honor as a gift of love from another.

But I have found it even more gratifying to watch a loved one open a package I have prepared just for them, wondering how they will receive it, or letting them discover a kind act done in their honor. Their joy fills my heart.

I have often imagined what God must think as we human beings take in the fullness of the gift of Christ—the Light of the World—coming in to our hurting world. What joy must fill God’s heart, knowing that the perfect gift has been given and received!

My hope and prayer for us during this season of Advent is that we will, indeed, receive that greatest gift AND that we pass on the hope, peace, love and joy that comes with Christ.

“Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!” 2 Corinthians 9:15

Prayer: Loving God, we thank you for the gift of Jesus Christ. We thank you for how that forever changed the course of humanity and how this gift brings new life and hope to all the world and to our very lives. May we lean in to the grace and goodness that comes from Christ, enabling his light and love to be shared with all. Amen.

~Mark Brainerd
December 25

The Gift of Immanuel

Therefore the Lord will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. Isaiah 7:14

Ever since those prophetic words were spoken by Isaiah, and every time they are spoken now, there is anticipation and expectation. What will this Immanuel be like – this “God with us?” Artists have attempted to create visual images of God in a myriad of ways over the centuries. How would we recognize God in our midst? What would God look like? Long before the birth of Jesus prophets spoke of the coming messiah in amazing ways. His name would be:

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
(Isaiah 9:6b)

Those names sound rather appropriate for talking about the author of creation. But Jesus turned out not to be what most people expected. Jesus: powerful, majestic, almighty? Not so much. Jesus arrived not in strength but weakness. He was born into a marginalized community; people who were oppressed; the son of ordinary working-class family.

His relationship with the religious system of the day was tense. He resisted the world’s affinity for wealth, pleasure, power, and recognition. He spent a good bit of time hanging around with the weak and powerless, the outcast, the widow, and the orphan. The truth that we have come to realize is God looks like Jesus! In Jesus we not only see God, we see the fullness of humanity – who you and I are created to be.

This was and continues to be God’s gift to us. God’s gift doesn’t fit into a “stocking hung by the chimney with care.” It must be received in our hearts. Simon Tugwell writes in his book Prayer:

“If we keep clamoring for things we want from God, we may often find ourselves disappointed, because we have forgotten the weakness of God and what we may call the poverty of God. We had thought of God as the dispenser of all good things we would possibly desire; but in a very real sense, God has nothing to give at all except himself.”

In the busyness, the wrappings and trappings, the parties and presents, the sounds and sights of the holiday season, do not miss the true gift of Immanuel – God with us.

~Butch Sherrill
2014 Advent Calendar of Activities

Events throughout Advent

November 23 – Dec. 7 – Angels for Partnership Village gifts available at worship venues and Friendly Ave. Fellowship Hall

November 30 – December 23
Las Posadas · Mary & Joseph spend a night at your home “en route to Bethlehem” Advent Devotional is available online or a printed booklet at worship venues Advent Sermon Series: Christmas: The Usual Suspects

December 7 – December 23
Honor cards and gifts from Alternative Giving available in church office & during Sunday fellowship times.

December 1 – 23: Salvation Army bell ringing at Harris Teeter
Shifts are Monday-Friday from 4-8 pm and Saturday from 10 am-8 pm

Mondays, Dec. 1, 8, 15, 22
7:30 am “Preparing in Silence” · Contemplative Prayer, Chapel

Wednesdays, Dec. 3, 10, 17
10:00 – 10:50 am – Lectio Divina, Chapel

Thursdays, Dec. 4, 11, 18
7:45 pm · Lectio Divina, Conference Room

First Week of Advent – November 30 thru December 6

November 30, 7:00 pm: Blue Christmas, Chapel
December 6, 9:00 – 11:00 am: Advent Celebration Breakfast & Alternative Giving Sale

Second Week of Advent – December 7 thru December 13

December 9, Noon: J.O.Y. lunch
December 13, Outrageous Outreach @ Salvation. Army Bells
December 13, Jazz Vespers, Sanctuary

Third Week of Advent · December 14 thru December 20

December 14: ALL Angel Tree gifts received

Fourth Week of Advent – December 21 thru December 27

December 21
4:00 pm: Chancel Choir Christmas Concert (Dinner to follow)

December 24
3:00 pm: Family Service, Friendly Ave
5:00 pm: Contemporary Service, Lake Brandt
Contemporary Service, Friendly Ave.
8:00 pm: Traditional Service, Friendly Ave.
11:00 pm: Communion & Candlelight Service, Friendly Ave.