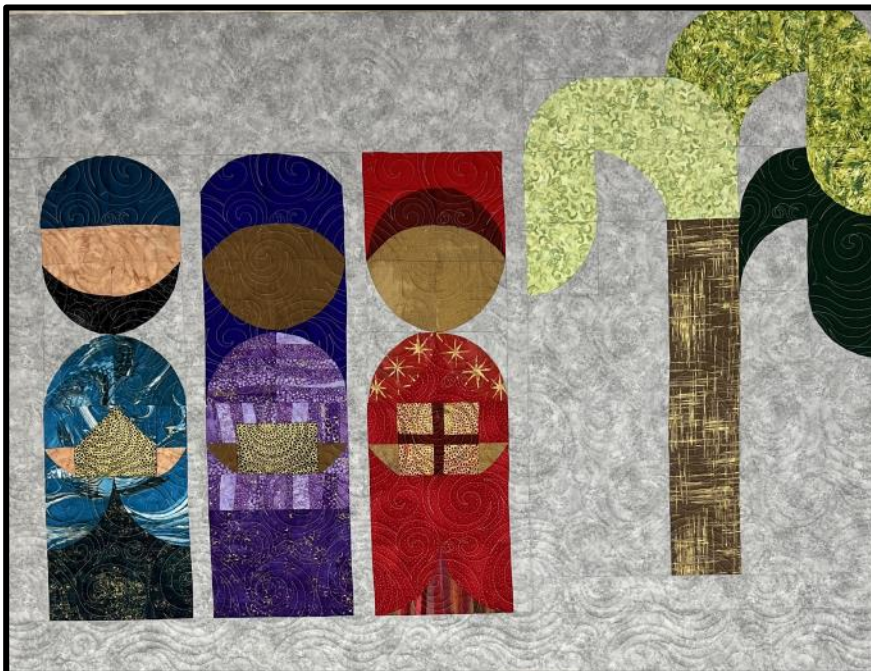


A Different Path

The theme for Bethel's Advent Devotional this year is **A Different Path**. The Magi, or Wise Men as they are more commonly called, are a familiar part of the Christmas story. According to tradition, these astronomers had been waiting for years, watching the heavens, for a sign of the coming Messiah. When they saw the special star, they immediately set out to find the promised Savior. The Magi undertook a journey to encounter God. Isn't that what every Christian life is, in its essence, a journey to the definitive encounter with God? As we wait through the weeks of Advent for Christmas to come, what lessons can we learn from these seekers of the promised one? After finding and worshipping the baby, God instructed them to go home by a different path. What different path might God be calling you to follow in 2025?

Our Advent Devotional contains stories of discovering hope, peace, joy, or love in the midst of life with all of its blessings and trials. It is written for the purpose of inspiring us to have hope and joy each day through the experience of Christ who has come in our lives. Bethel folks have shared from the heart in this booklet. May these devotions inspire you to find hope and joy each day of the Advent and Christmas season.



December 1

Hope: The Star

And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. Matthew 2:12

Matthew tells the story of the Magi, also known as the wise men, who observed a star and sought out Jesus. Every year, Christians around the world pay tribute to the Magi, particularly during Advent. During this season, churches often sing the famous song "We Three Kings," which was written in the 1800s. Interestingly, the Bible does not specify the exact number of wise men; however, it is generally assumed that there were three based on the number of gifts they presented to Jesus. Nevertheless, this detail is not what matters most in the story.



What is significant is the contrast between the decisions made by the wise men and the unwise King Herod. The wise men traveled hundreds of miles through the desert in search of Jesus and worshiped Him upon finding Him. In contrast, King Herod did not even take the trouble to travel a few miles to Bethlehem to investigate whether the wise men were correct. By prioritizing his own interests, he missed out on an experience that could have transformed him.

The text states that when the Magi found Jesus, they "were overjoyed." This encapsulates the essence of Christmas: it brings joy to those who earnestly seek Jesus and invite Him into their lives. Meeting Jesus changes our paths; after worshiping Him, the Magi returned home by a different route. The angel advised them to take this alternative path to avoid King Herod, who intended to harm them. However, this also serves as a powerful metaphor: Worshiping Jesus should inspire us to change the way we live.

The Advent season presents a wonderful opportunity to reflect on our Christian faith. As we prepare to welcome Jesus in the manger, God encourages us to take the time to examine our lives. What old paths might God be calling you to abandon? What new route is He revealing for you to follow starting today?

Father God, lead us through this Advent journey to a new path in relationship and service to You in 2025. Thank You for Your guiding presence, constant love, and hope we have in the promise of peace. Amen.

Pastor Nadeem Khokhar

December 2 Hope: The Star



*Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him."
Matthew 1:1-2*

How do we know when God is speaking to us, when he is making a star rise in our hearts? The surest clue is that deep interior joy, that stirring of the heart, that the Wise Men experienced when they saw the star. Matthew's gospel describes the Magi as being "overjoyed at seeing the star." In the midst of our journey of faith, God touches us and guides us through the incomparable satisfaction that we taste deep in our hearts whenever we hear God calling there, whenever we catch a glimpse of the starlight of God's love.

The Magi yearned for more meaningful contact with God, and so, seeing the star, God's promise of and invitation to that contact, filled them with joy. Likewise, our hearts yearn for more meaningful contact with God, because they yearn for true, lasting happiness, and that can only be found in God — not in popularity, comfort, wealth, or achievements, but only in God. And so, whenever we hear his voice, whenever we see the star and feel its invitation, we also feel a deep interior joy, a yearning both sweet and sweetly painful, that inspires us to continue forward on our journey. Haven't we all felt that before? Don't we all want to feel it again?

Let's take some time now to remember the stars that God has used to guide us in our Christian lives so far, to look for the star that he is giving us right now, and to ask him for the grace to always recognize and follow every star he sends us, just as the Magi did.

Father God, Send us a star this Advent season to guide our hearts to the manger. In the name of the One who came to save us, we pray. Amen.

Rosanne Williamson

Dear Lord

A song written and composed by Brooke Hahne

Dear Lord
Here I am again
Coming here again
Asking for your strength
I've fallen down
Down deeper down down
Farther than I've fallen before

The world has briar patches
And sticks and stones
And bruises

The world has thorns yet roses
Has rain, storms, promises
Rainbows after cloudy days
And your light shining on me

So I ask for your love, Lord
I ask you for your strength
So I ask for your gift, Lord
Your gift of mercy and grace

Dear Lord
Much has happened since
I came here last
I hope it's fine
Your light has shined on me
Brightened darkest days
Helped me heal my ways
Shown me love

The world has briar patches
And sticks and stones
And bruises

The world has thorns yet roses
Has rain, storms, promises
Rainbows after cloudy days
And your light shining on me

So I ask for your love, Lord
I ask you for your strength
So I ask for your gift, Lord
Your gift of mercy and grace

Dear Lord
Here I am again
Coming here again
In the darkest night
Sometimes I cry
I cry alone
But now I know I was never
alone

I suffer yet I'm whole
I bleed and cry
Yet I know
I'm not alone
I'm not alone
I'm not alone

The world has briar patches
And sticks and stones
And bruises

The world has thorns yet roses
Has rain, storms, promises
Rainbows after cloudy days
And your light shining on me

So I ask for your love, Lord
I ask you for your strength
So I ask for your gift, Lord
Your gift of mercy and grace



December 3

Hope: The Star

Arise, shine, for your light has come...the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you..... Lift up your eyes and look about you....Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy. Isaiah 60: 2,4,5

As an apartment-dwelling city kid in the mean streets of New York City's South Bronx, I hoped and hoped and hoped that someday I would live in a house in the country — just like my family's summer cabin, which was high up in the wooded hills of the Catskill Mountains. It was the most heavenly retreat I could ever have imagined. It was in the village of Wurtsboro Hills, and thus began my obsession with hills and mountains and woods. Having my own house in the hills someday was my hope and dream. Someday.

But until then, when I finally moved out of my parents' apartment and into my own, it was to another area of the city known as Forest Hills. OK, so it wasn't the country, and there were hardly any trees. But my street was a steep hill. A hill. I guess that was a start.

When I got married and moved to northwest New Jersey, it was to a house in a wooded area called Mount Olive. Hmmm that was unintentional, but somehow we were led there, to a "mount". After 12 happy years there, our job transfers led us to Virginia, to my current house deep in the woods on a road called Hilltop Lane.

Looking back now, I am filled with wonder that absolutely none of those places I've lived in was ever deliberately sought for its specific name. I believe I was led to each of them, as an answer to my hopes and prayers. It was the path that finally led me to a place, after many many years of not consciously following Jesus, and not belonging to any church, where I found not only a home in the hills but, more importantly, my church home. That path was not an easy one. Along the way, my husband suffered a terminal brain cancer. But his ultimate decision — that we needed to finally seek and find God — landed us at Bethel, at the church that was strategically located on the winding road that he had driven past each weekend for four years on his way to his golf club in Haymarket. That was no coincidence.

We began attending. In Bethel's Bible studies, I found a verse that became my favorite: "I lift my eyes to the hills. Where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord". (Psalm 121:1). I live in the hills, just like I always hoped, and each day I lift my eyes to peer through the tree canopy at another ridge of distant hills, and I smile. My studies also

taught me about Jesus and the Mount of Olives, and it makes me wonder that we once found a home in Mount Olive, NJ. Not a coincidence. God was with us, and he had a plan that I would discover only when looking back at the paths I've been on.

The path that led me to where I am now — both physically and spiritually — is very, very different from where I started out so many years ago, and it led me to a tragic situation that was never in my original plans or hopes. But He also led me through it, and put me in Bethel. Looking back, I no longer see the irony in the names of the places I've lived, but instead I see the wonder of God's plan. I see that God fulfilled the hopes of a little girl and has been with me in every step of the way.

Thank you, dear Heavenly Father, for being the guiding star that has led me down winding paths that I didn't know at the time would lead to You. I am so glad they finally did. Amen.

Cathy Carayas



December 4

Hope: The Star

But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect. 1 Peter 3:15

A woman, who I frequently drove to medical and other appointments, had an opportunity to relocate closer to town. She was currently living in a less than a suitable dwelling far in the county. However, the landlord required her to immediately pay a deposit up front or lose her current position in “line.” Because she didn’t have the money, she was losing the hope she had built for a better home.

After discussing with my financial advisor (Nancy) and praying about it, we (with God’s blessing) came to the conclusion that providing her with the funds was the thing to do.

She is now happily relocated closer to town and within walking distance to stores and shopping centers. And, by the way, with a small and unexpected “windfall” (God does provide!), she repaid us the funds we had advanced her with plenty left over to spare.

Lord, I lift up all those who are struggling to find hope. May Your light shine in their lives and dispel the darkness. Use me as an instrument of hope to encourage and support those in need. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

Gary Pinson



December 5

Hope: The Star

So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

1 Corinthians 13:13

My dear Pat has been at the Blue Ridge Christian Nursing Home for 14 months, and it has lifted my spiritual life considerably by the love, joy, and hope that I see daily at the nursing home. I visit my Pat every day and take part in feeding her as her health has declined with the Alzheimer's disease. I also volunteer on Friday evenings to assist with Bingo by being the numbers caller. Many of the patients need assistance with the game because they're limited and I and the staff help them along. The laughter and joy on their faces when they win Bingo will tickle your heart with their expressions and receiving their choice of candy as the prize.



On certain scheduled dates, singing groups come to entertain the patients by singing church hymns with them and reading scripture from the Bible. Seeing them participating in the singing and joy on their faces with happiness in their heart comes from our Heavenly Father.

I cannot over emphasize the love, caring, and dedication that I see coming from the staff to the patients and the joy it brings to both. In addition, the staff personnel greet the visiting families and friends of the patients with so much sincere love and enthusiasm. One thing in particular is, as the visitor walks through the front lobby door, a staff member rushes to bring the visitor a chair while they are visiting their loved one.

The above described story brings to me so much love, joy, and happiness. It reveals to me that it's all coming through GRACE from our Heavenly Father, showing us all of his true love for us.

May the God of hope fill You with all joy and peace as You trust in Him, so that You may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13)

Ken Adams

December 6

Hope: The Star

And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace. Luke 1:76-69

Hope biblically is defined as confident affirmation that God is faithful, that He will complete what He has started. Hope is a feeling of expectations and desire for something good to happen. As we wait, excitement grows and hope is in the air during Advent.

This is reflected in things we hope for. I have hope for safe road trips or healthy checkups. I remember hoping for good grades on a test, that new dress to wear to the church program, that brown bag with an orange and some hard candy passed out to all of us after our performance. As a child, our church pageant was always after Christmas.

During this season keep hope in our hearts. Keep it there with the shopping, decorating, and baking! Remember we are looking forward to the birth of Jesus.

*Come, Thou long expected Jesus
Born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us,
Let us find our rest in Thee.
Israel's strength and consolation,
Hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.*

Our Father, help us keep love and hope in our hearts this Advent season. Amen.

Delores Goff



December 7

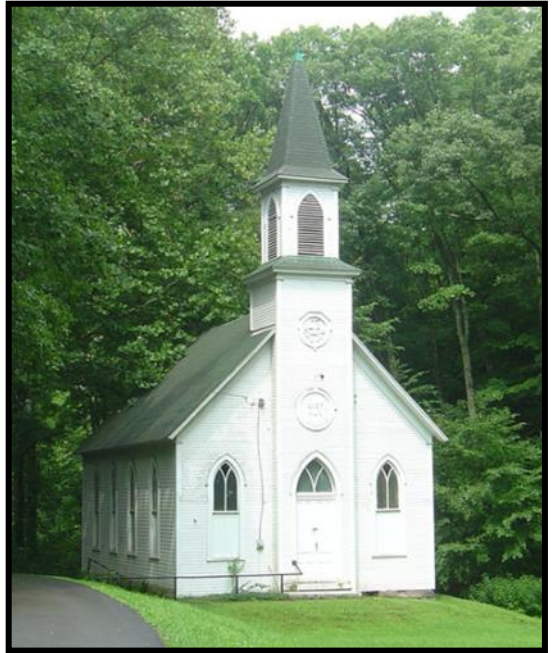
Hope: The Star

A star showing the way for the Magi! How exciting when they finally saw that star telling them where the baby Jesus was located. Wow!

Matthew 2:1-12

We have had so many “stars” showing us the way throughout life. One of the greatest ones in my life was being raised by Christian parents who shared their love of Christ with everyone. What a blessing it has been for me.

We belonged to the East Run Methodist Episcopal Church (built in 1885) near Farmington, WV, as we lived on a farm near the church. We didn't farm much as my parents were school teachers. But, we did have a cow, a pig, a pony, a dog, chickens, bees, etc. Yes, there was a while when Daddy was fascinated with bees!



Recently, after many years since the church closed its doors, someone bought it and has totally made it into a lovely Air B&B. It's called Heavenly Haven. This project was completed by Oct. 11, 2024. The church looks the same on the outside, and now, after so many years sitting empty, it will have life again. The gal who had this vision has kept the stained glass windows the same, as well as the cross and other mementos in place. Hopefully those who stay there for a few days or weeks will be blessed by their surroundings.

Even though the church has now been converted into a rest stop, I will always have the memories of growing up there with my family and friends and learning what it means to be a Christian in this ever changing world where we live. Hopefully we can all reach out and share with others the path to making disciples of Christ in our daily living.

Heavenly Father, thank You for sharing the many stars in our lives guiding us, and thank You especially for sharing with the Magi to return a different route and save the baby Jesus. Amen.

Jane Brewer

December 8

Peace: The Journey

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” Matthew 5:3-4

Recently, I had the opportunity to spend some time with several people from Bethel and beyond, talking about navigating the upcoming holidays without a loved one. Many expressed sadness, loss of control, isolation, depression and loneliness at the thought of the approaching Christmas season. All of us in the group had lost spouses, children, parents, friends and others. Some of the losses were very recent, while others were many years ago. Regardless of the timeline, the losses are significant and at the holiday season, the empty chair, the empty house, pulling out all the decorations without help, cooking for one, are the “in your face” reality of our “aloneness.”

The words of Jesus in the *Sermon on the Mount*, promise the Kingdom of Heaven to those who are poor in spirit. Jesus assures us that those who mourn will be comforted. We hear those words with our ears; but receiving them into our hearts is a little more difficult when loneliness and uncertainty has us in its grip. The comfort and the Kingdom of Heaven on earth of which Jesus spoke feel abstract and elusive. This is where we all can help. How can you bring comfort and snippets of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth to those who are hurting? Remembering that everyone grieves differently, here are a few ways you could be a vessel of comfort to someone.

Don't pressure them into celebrating the way they always did.

Don't insist they put up a tree. Instead, take a small floral arrangement and visit.

If they want to decorate a tree, help them. And come back when it's time to put it all away.

Don't insist they bake all the goodies as usual. Instead take them a plate of cookies.

If they don't feel compelled to send cards, assure them people will understand.

Gift-giving? If shopping in the beautifully decorated stores with seasonal music playing may cause a melt-down; encourage them to shop on-line. Or skip it!

Encourage them to celebrate differently. Take a trip. Visit family or friends out of

town. Help with the homeless shelter or motel ministry. Meet up for a meal.

Encourage them to get extra rest. Take walks. Breathe in the fresh air. Let them talk while you listen.

Encourage them to find a grief counselor to help sort out feelings and fears.

There's no right or wrong way and there's no timeline to grief. For me, when the memories come flooding back: certain smells, certain carols and songs, a certain ornament, the White Christmas movie, the Preacher's Wife movie, whatever it is.... I just let the tears come. When they stop (and they will), I get up and wash my face and do something different! It works for me.

Our group plans to get together again to listen to each other and perhaps do a service project. Watch for information about the group which for now is called "Tinsel & Tears."

O God, thank You for this sacred season of waiting. Quiet my heart to see Your holiness today. And Lord, let me be a source of strength and comfort to those who grieve. Amen.

Patricia Martin



December 9

Peace: The Journey

A child has been born for us.

We have been given a son who will be our ruler.

*His names will be Wonderful Advisor and Mighty God,
Eternal Father and Prince of Peace.*

His power will never end; peace will last forever.

He will rule David's kingdom and make it grow strong.

He will always rule with honesty and justice.

The Lord All-Powerful will make certain that all of this is done. Isaiah 9:6-7

A child was indeed born for us...the prophecy of which was spoken by the Prophet Isaiah of the coming rule of Jesus on earth. He predicted not only the Christ Child's birth, but the deity, his heavenly and earthly kingdoms, indeed of the eternity of our Christ, our Lord and Savior. His power, His rule, His peace, His Love...His journey will never end, and ours will never end as we follow HIM.

My daily devotion story for today is more a prayer, in the form of a couple of stanzas of original prose I would like to offer, inspired by love and by His grace upon my life...

Dear Lord,

You are my breath and my life

The breeze that fills my wings

I soar through life on Your Grace

You fill me with being and purpose

You take me places, my dear Lord

To heights no one else can

Bringing me high from the lows

Keeping me grounded as I need

You, Lord...

...are the host for my soul

...are the breath of my body

...are the reason for my life's journey

Amen

Don Otey



December 10

Peace: The Journey

The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. Isaiah 11:6

It was a misty evening with the smell of coal and peat in the air. I was walking along a road in a small village in Northern Ireland. I knew the residents here had a sad history of hate and violence that struck suddenly and crippled people, their homes and their families. The shutters of the houses I passed looked empty, but I knew they had just closed their curtains to ward off the chill of the evening. There was a house at the edge of town, however, that was lit with open curtains and a slightly open door. I could see mothers and fathers with their teenage kids going into this house. I could hear laughter coming out of the door, and as I got nearer I could see smiles on faces and pot luck dishes exchanged.

I took a last look over my shoulder to see if any Army patrols were along the road. I had been stopped earlier in the day by just such a patrol that pointed guns at me demanding to know what I was doing...after checking me out they let me go on my way. I didn't want to have another experience like that this special evening. You see these families were going to a meeting I was going to lead to find out about sending their youth to America to be a part of a peace program for which I was currently serving as president. Before the food was blessed and eaten and before my speech, one more family with two youth came in the front door to be welcomed by the families within. As I went to greet them, I noticed the father gently weeping as he hung up his coat. I went up to him and asked if he was ok. He just smiled through his tears and told me that he had lived in this village all his life but had never been in the home of someone from the other side of the conflict in Northern Ireland. He said I couldn't understand how this community had literally fought in the streets here....he was sick of the hatred, sick of the violence, and wanted better for his kids and family. Right then I knew why I was in Northern Ireland again. I was working for something these people had rarely seen—Peace. I knew that misty night how precious peace really is and how God is leading us to peace and understanding with each other.

Northern Ireland is a beautiful place, but with peace it is a wonderful place to live and work with what were former enemies turned friends in their own neighborhood.

*God, give us hearts filled with peace toward all, even those very different from us.
Amen.*

Rev. John Chadsey

December 11

Peace: The Journey

*Trust in the Lord and do good;
Dwell in the land and
feed on His faithfulness.
Psalm 37:3*

Praying for peace seems to be on most everyone's heart these days. We can be bombarded with information from all over our country and the entire world. Last week I was having one of those days when everything just seemed very heavy. I had a Bible study at Bethel that morning, and I was sitting in class watching the red and yellow leaves blow in circles as they fell to the ground. It was truly beautiful! Looking around the room, it was also beautiful to see other Christian women gathered to hear God's voice. They came because they genuinely seek His will to become better stewards and to help others.



Psalm 37 also tells us to dwell in the land and feed on His faithfulness. We live in an area where we can walk outside to watch the moon rise, see the geese fly in formation at dusk, the stars twinkle brightly in the sky (most nights), and perhaps we can sometimes watch the moon set in the west. His mercies are new everyday. God's faithfulness to us is all around, and He is always with us. The signs are everywhere.

Father God, I pray for the strength to silence the noise of the world, and to be more aware of Your peace that passes all understanding. Amen.

Kelly Eisele



December 12

Peace: The Journey

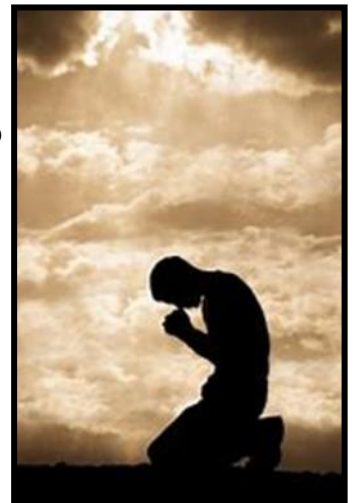
Delight yourself in the LORD, and He will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD; trust also in Him, and He will bring it to pass. He will bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your judgment as the noonday. Psalm 37:4-6

For a long time I have felt something missing in my life and I could not figure out what it was. I am married to the love of my life, we live in a nice home, and God has blessed me big time. Yet something was missing. One day I took a step back and looked at my life and asked God, "What am I missing?" So I waited for Him to answer. It wasn't an immediate reply but God was giving me the answer. God was saying, "Maybe it's your relationship with Me." I was surprised and ashamed of myself. While I thought I was doing all the right things, I was not always putting God first. What can I do to change and be a better Christian? I don't know why, but the Walk to Emmaus popped in my head. I had been thinking about it before but found all kinds of excuses to put it off. Two reasons why I didn't go earlier were I didn't feel like I was spiritually in the right place and I felt I was being pressured by my peers.

But this fall I knew something was needed to revive my spiritual life and my relationship with God. I was determined that the very next time a men's Emmaus Walk was offered, I would definitely be there. I had that opportunity this past October and I went. This time, as I was scheduled to go, I felt like God wanted me to be there. I cannot put into words what an amazing experience I had. It was something that I felt in my heart. Since then, I have never felt closer to God in my life. What I was missing was a closer relationship to God, and I found it during the Walk to Emmaus. There were times when I could not hold back the tears. I believe that was God saying to me "Welcome back Tom, I missed you." Psalm 37: 5 states: "Commit your way to the LORD; trust also in Him, and He will bring it to pass." Without realizing it, I had been trusting in myself more than God. BIG MISTAKE! The weekend on the mountain opened my eyes to what I was doing and it was a big wake up call for me to change. And I did! I know that whatever life throws my way, God can help me handle it. Our God is a mighty God.

Dear Lord, Thank You for the never-ending peace and unconditional love You give me, and for opening my eyes and heart to realize the importance of having a relationship with You. Help me to continue to trust You and follow Your path by faith. Amen.

Tom Ferrell



December 13

Peace: The Journey

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. On having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. Matthew 2:9-12

As I've begun preparations this year for the celebration of Jesus' birth, I've been thinking back over the many paths Lewis and I and our family have traveled together over the years. All the decisions that have been made and the paths we've chosen to travel have changed the course of our lives.

In this secular world of over-the-top gift giving and trying to outdo the next-door neighbor with overdone decorating, it is so easy to get lost in the "season" and forget that this is Advent, the time to reflect on what's coming ahead. The Lees are no different - we get just as caught up in the hoopla and miss the opportunity to find the peace that comes with putting Jesus first.

I think we need to remember the example set by the Wise Men. With evil in his heart Herod had sent them on this mission so he could find out where this new King was and he could have Him killed. Instead, the Magi found the baby, and their lives were changed forever as they returned to their country by another route. They choose a different path!

In 2025 I know there will be new challenges and new choices in my life. And I know a lot of what happens in my life depends on the most important path I take – the path the Lord asks me to follow.

Dear Heavenly Father, thank You for all that You provide for us each day. Thank You most of all for the gift of Your son, Jesus. Please stay by us and guide us to stay on your path. Equip us with clear direction and with love in our hearts for all, despite any differences among us. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

Ava Lee



December 14

Peace: The Journey

Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path. Psalm 119:105

A memory of a “Star” guiding the journey:



To the older man standing around on campus handing out Bibles—thank you. I watched as some laughed in your face, took the Bible and slapped their friend with it, then handed it back to you. I watched as others rolled their eyes and kept walking, but then I saw those who were receptive. You simply stood there, smiled, and wished each one of them a good day, even those who laughed in your face. Thank you, as you're representing Jesus more deeply than I think you even realize. From a post on social media in 2016.

This fellow is my older brother, Jim, sharing with others at West Virginia University eight years ago. He, his wife Mary Ann, and friends from The Gideons International are representing Jesus in the real world. No matter what, Jim always has a smile to share with others. I wonder how many lives of students may have been touched by this small gesture which the Gideons share each fall. Yes, today the Gideons still share this message with schools, nursing homes, hotels, and all over the world. These Bibles have saved many lives just by being in a hotel room when needed.

Father, we thank You for all those who reach out and share Your Word with others, no matter what the circumstance may be at the time. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Jane Brewer

December 15

Joy: The Adoration

*He will be a joy and a delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth.
Luke 1:14*

Wow, it is December 15th, already! Just ten days until Christmas morning arrives! As the days continue toward Christmas morning, our excitement builds with anticipation. Anticipation of spending time with loved ones, friends, family, and sharing special gifts. Imagine for a moment how excited the Magi must have been when they ventured from the east to Jerusalem seeking the birth of Jesus. The Magi had seen His star and followed it with excitement and were overjoyed when they



saw the star top over the location where Jesus was born. This time reflects their fulfillment of the long journey and the anticipation of meeting the Messiah. To share this joy, the Magi shared precious gifts symbolizing honor, gratitude, and reverence.

As we take steps, day by day, toward Christmas morning, may I encourage us to stop, look up to the sky and imagine how the Magi felt as they made their journey to meet the Messiah. May we experience that same immense joy of anticipation and recognition that we too can encounter Christ in the coming days. Through worship, sharing time with family, and giving loving gifts, we too will experience the spiritual happiness that comes from encountering Christ during this special time of year.

Heavenly Father, we ask for Your grace, peace, and love as we seek to encounter You during this Christmas season. May our actions during this season reflect Your love. We ask Your guidance as we seek ways for others to experience the magic of this season and the joy of the arrival of our Messiah. Amen.

Brett Hahne

December 16

Joy: The Adoration

*After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."
Matthew 2:1-2*

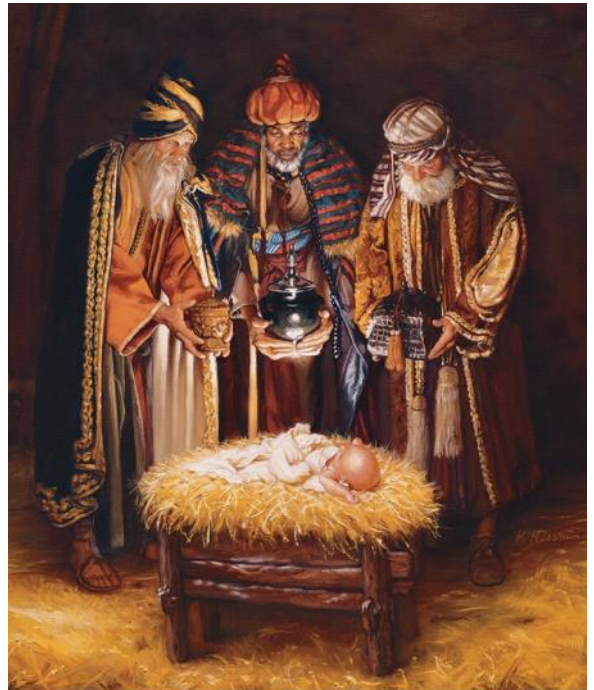
At Christmas time when we were kids, we would pack up the car and drive five hours to our grandparents' house. The suitcases would go in the trailer, and mom and dad did a good job packing all the presents for us kids without our knowledge too. We would get into our pajamas and then in the car we went.

Dad would drive well into the night to get us there safely. We would fall asleep on the way and upon arrival transfer from the car to bed. In the morning, we would be so excited to be at our grandparents. We knew the house would be full come Christmas day but the lead up to Christmas was always full of anticipation. There were frosted cookies, treats, and games to play. Then all our aunts, uncles and cousins would come too. We would throw sleeping bags on the floor and find a spot to snuggle in for the night.

One of the best things was when you were old enough to go to midnight mass. This was such a special time to hear the story of Jesus's birth and gather as a family to worship. The church was so beautiful and full with people. Years later I thought how hard it must have been for the three kings to travel in Jesus's time, following a star for directions. Imagine how long it must have taken to get to the manger where Jesus lay. All for the joy of giving their gifts and worshiping Jesus.

Lord, thank You for the many blessings of this season and the gift of Your son. Amen.

Mary Shriver



December 17

Joy: The Adoration

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Luke 2:8-12

As we journey through Advent, a season of anticipation and reflection, we are reminded that joy can be found in the most unexpected places. The story of Christ's birth is filled with individuals who became unexpected teachers, guiding us toward a deeper understanding of joy.

In Matthew 2, we see the wise men from the east, who teach us about the joy of worship and adoration. Despite their high status, they humble themselves before a newborn King, showing us that true wisdom recognizes the joy in honoring Christ.

In Luke 2, we encounter the shepherds, lowly and marginalized, yet chosen to receive the angelic announcement of Christ's birth. They teach us that joy is often found in the simplest moments and that God's message is for everyone, regardless of status.

Psalm 145 is a song of praise, recognizing God's greatness and the joy that comes from acknowledging His works. It reminds us that joy is rooted in our recognition of God's presence in our lives, through the people and experiences that shape us.

Reflecting on these Scriptures, we see that everyone we encounter has the potential to be our teacher, from the wisdom of elders to the fresh perspective of children. My own life has been enriched by the lessons from my parents, my son, Shane, and baby grandson, Everest. They've taught me that joy is not just a feeling but a practice of seeing God's hand in all things.

This Advent, let's open our hearts to the teachers around us, finding Joy in the wisdom they impart. May we, like the wise men, the shepherds, and the psalmist, recognize the divine lessons in our everyday encounters and respond with hearts full of joy.

Lord, open our eyes to the lessons You place before us. Help us to see every person as a vessel of Your wisdom, leading us closer to You. Fill our hearts with joy as we learn from one another. Amen.

Joanne Clary

December 18

Joy: The Adoration

When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Matthew 2:10-11

For the second year in a row, I will be far from home for the holiday season, away from the family traditions in Virginia, and away from the brisk winter. But luckily, this year my immediate family will be together. Our military service moved us to Hawaii this past summer. Experiencing the lack of seasons has certainly been a change. We embrace the aloha of the islands. *Mele Kalikimaka* will be our greeting this year. Instead of sitting by the fire in my parent's house, we will enjoy our morning coffee on our lanai under a rainbow after the daily rain shower. All of our neighbors are also experiencing the holidays in paradise this year, away from their traditions. We all come together, strangers becoming friends with the joy of the season. Our greatest gift this year is a new baby boy. We never would have guessed we'd have three boys, but we are incredibly blessed.

This Advent season for us is similar in many ways to the experience of Mary and Joseph. When the angel Gabriel told Mary she would give birth to a son and call him Jesus, she was at home in Nazareth. But some months later, she spent the first Advent traveling to a strange place. Upon the birth of her child, she was in a strange place among people she didn't know. However, the others she met that night came from far away too and provided love, support, and help. While far from home, Mary found joy in her growing family and the love of strangers.

Like the Magi and Mary and Joseph, we are far from home, but still finding joy.

Heavenly Father, may we embrace the joy that comes from being part of our earthly families as well as Your heavenly family this Christmas season. Make strangers into friends as we share Your love with all around us. Amen.

Greg Steinmeyer



December 19

Joy: The Adoration

*Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth,
burst into jubilant song with music;
Make music to the LORD with the harp,
with the harp and the sound of singing,
With trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn—
shout for joy before the LORD, the King.
Let the sea resound, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it.
Let the rivers clap their hands,
let the mountains sing together for joy. Psalm 98:4-8*



I am always delighted when asked to write about joy. I know my name is spelled with an “i” in the middle instead of a “y”, but I always like to think that my name and joy have a close kinship. As I was pondering what I might share this Advent season I did a little research to find out the best Bible verses to use and I was pointed to Psalm 98. Then I did a little more research to learn a bit about the origin of the song, “Joy to the World”. Guess what? Issac Watts used the words of Psalm 98 (somewhat paraphrased) to write what became the song “Joy to the World” in 1719 as a poem. This was a time before hymns were actually sung as hymns, but the music of the church was the singing of the Psalms.

In my years as a church musician, it has always been one of my favorite ways to close a joyous Christmas, (or Easter) service with a rousing rendition of Joy to the World on the organ with all of the stops opened wide. To me the words and the music are both filled with a burst of joy. Listen to people sing it this Advent and Christmas season and tell me if you don’t hear real exuberance coming from their voices and evident on their faces.

The Bible and our hymnal (Do you pay attention to the words of the hymns?) are full of messages of joy. Take time this Advent and Christmas season to look for and listen to expressions of joy. Better still, be one of those persons who exudes joy to everyone you meet; joy of knowing that Christ our Savior is born.

*Joy to the world the Lord is come
Let earth receive her king
Let every heart prepare Him room
And heaven and nature sing
And heaven and nature sing
And heaven and Heaven and nature sing. Amen.*

Jo(i)ce Fredenburgh

December 20

Joy: The Adoration

My mouth will speak in praise of the LORD. Let every creature praise his holy name for ever and ever. Psalm 145:21

As the message in Psalm 145 speaks to us, we learn that the Lord is King over all generations. The words tell us about a powerful new world. It teaches and reminds us that:

God is gracious, merciful, and compassionate
God's kingdom is everlasting and will continue for generations
God is concerned for the lowly and downcast
God is there for those who call on him
God's grace is with us through faith
God is our creator- we are all God's creations

This is the perfect time to praise God and to celebrate his greatest gift to us- the birth of his son, Jesus Christ. God wanted to change the world and He knew His Son could do this and affect generation after generation. As we celebrate this gift, let us reflect on how we can show our adoration for God. Adoration is a feeling of deep love, respect, and admiration. We can express our adoration with our devotion to God and His Son, Jesus Christ.

To demonstrate this deep love and faithfulness, we can:
Live your life so you demonstrate the blessings you have received
Praise God through prayers. Praying can calm our fears and concerns. It can lift our spirits and fill us with joy.
Live our lives for God's glory and pass on the knowledge of God's glory to the next generation.
Remember that God carries our troubles and trials for us- he provides for all our needs
God loves everyone
God keeps His promises
God is great- all the time

We are joyful in our faith and the joy of the Lord. So let us reflect on the following question during this season and during the coming year: How can we be more faithful in opportunities to be a witness and show our adoration to God?

Dear Lord, I adore You because You are great and should be praised. All that we have are gifts from You. We can look around us every day and see Your greatness in Your creations. We know You are always with us. Thank You for your greatest gift to us- the salvation and gift of eternal life. Amen.

Sandra Colvin

December 21

Joy: The Adoration

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Luke 2: 8-12

The story in Luke reminds us of God's presence and the gift of our savior. Angels appeared to the shepherds and they were directed to follow the star and then to joyfully share the good news of the birth of Jesus Christ with everyone. It was not the rich and powerful to whom the angels spoke, but to the poor shepherds. The shepherds were changed by what they witnessed and they shared the glory and praised God. God's presence was made known through the birth of Jesus. He knew that His Son would share His ministry. Jesus would heal the sick, open His heart to the needy, and call all the people to Him. We are reminded in Luke that:

Jesus showed compassion for those who were rejected by society.

Jesus served others and cared for them.

Jesus brought spiritual and physical healing to those in need.

Jesus shared that God is pleased with humble people (people that build others up and spend time serving people).

Jesus wanted people to have faith. When facing hard times, find a quiet place to pray to share your concerns with God.

We learn that the good news needs to spread like a light- share the "star" that the angels directed the shepherds to follow. In order for people to hear the message, people must see the light to respond. In Luke, Jesus says that the people who hear God's words and then act on the words will be "His true family." Jesus again tells us that His teachings should be practiced- not just listened to or read. Jesus is telling us the importance of not only hearing the words of God, but also understanding and practicing them. Let us "spread the light" and share the messages through our lives.

Dear Lord, thank You for loving us so much that You sent Your Son, Jesus Christ, to share Your message with us. We ask You to help us to be good messengers of Your message and bring Jesus to others. Help us as we honor, worship, and praise You with our whole heart. In Your name we pray. Amen

Sandra Colvin

December 22

Love: The Gifts

But now, this is what the Lord says: he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. Isaiah 43:1-3

Recently I was asked if I could write an Advent devotion. I wasn't sure if I could come up with one, so I did not commit. That Sunday afternoon I was standing at my kitchen sink peeling some wrinkled apples that had been hanging around in my refrigerator a little too long. I cut them up to go with our lunch. The apples were delicious even though outwardly they did not look their best.



I remembered the time when I took my grandchildren for a hike across our family farm to pick apples from a very old tree. I would try to shake the branches that I could reach, and the apples would fall to the ground and roll down the hill, with my grandchildren chasing after them. The fruit was small and had some bruises and spots on the peelings. We brought them back to the farm house and I washed them and later made a delicious pie.

I then started thinking about scripture that I have been trying to memorize-- Isaiah 43:1-3. This scripture was mentioned in the series we have been watching, *The Chosen*.

No matter what you look like, how old you are, what you have done, or how you feel about your life, God loves you, He created you, and thinks you are beautiful. God loves it when you seek Him by studying His word and bringing everything to Him in prayer. He will be with you through good times and bad. He is the best friend you will ever have. Ask Him to forgive you of your sins and come into your heart today. You will receive joy, peace, and true contentment.

Lord Jesus, thank You for the confidence You give me, that I am Yours, and that You alone are enough in my life. I love you. Amen.

Karen Nelson

December 23 Love: The Gifts

The King will reply, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." Mathew 25:40

As I was getting ready for my next trip to Kenya, I was asked to write a devotional. I was telling one of my friends about this and he reminded me of the blessings we receive doing these types of trips. No matter what I bring as a blessing to the people being served, I receive more back.

I know the gifts I am bringing will bring so much joy to the people in Mombasa. I know how humbled I am by the students and adults who won't let me carry things. I was at first mad because I could not do anything, but then I realized that this was how they are able to give back to me. The four students I sponsor all want to serve others. Brenda wants to be a lawyer, Peter plans to join law enforcement/military, Synwin wants to be a doctor, and Bessy, a teacher.

The gifts for the Mombasa people come from our community. I know the shoes will be a blessing. The school yard equipment will enhance the education experiences of many children. A lady who has lived in her car for years decided the students in Kenya needed soccer-balls, kick-balls, jump ropes, frisbees, and other playground equipment and pumps. Two different authors gave me three books from the Fall Festival. The lady who sells soaps at the Warrenton Farmer Market give me a dozen bars of soap. And all the laptops and cash gifts, some from people at Bethel. I cannot wait to share the pictures and videos with you all.

I remember each of my mission trips, both in this country and abroad. I remember loading up for Katrina years ago and being asked what was needed as people walked into Walmart. I told the parents to give what they felt was on their hearts and let the children pick some of the donations. Pop Tarts and a remote control car were among the donations. The parent was embarrassed, but their child insisted on it. When I got to Biloxi, a little boy came up to me and asked for one Pop Tart. I tried to give him the full foil package, but he refused, saying another child could have it. I gave him the box and asked him to give them out to the other children. That story stuck with me. My heart was broken for those families in Appalachia from this last hurricane we had. Am I supposed to go with some of the teams to NC and help? I heard God's voice saying, "You go to Kenya, and take care of those people."

Like the Magi, I am traveling to a far country. Do I expect to see Jesus while I am there in Kenya? Yes, I know I will. I had been told years ago to expect God, and He will answer our prayers. Often I now pray for and give thanks for the blessings before they are shown. Just like the Magi, I go loaded with gifts for the people of slums and villages of Kenya. Many wish they had a stable and animals. Many wish they had clean water and food. I don't feel like a wise man but I do wonder what the Magi were thinking as they went to Bethlehem and lay their gifts before a baby in a manger. How can this poor child be the King of Kings?

Dear Father, Thank You for all the gifts and donations for Kenya. I know great things will be shown to me while I am over there. I look forward to seeing how the children have grown and how You have blessed the donations. I don't know what to expect from this trip, but like the Magi, I do know I ain't seen nothing yet! Amen.

Ken Trexler



In memoriam: Ken died due to medical complications during this last mission trip to Kenya. He was truly a saint who had a heart for all people in need. He made a difference in many lives. Well done, good and faithful servant.

December 24

Christmas Eve

The angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I am bringing you good news that will be a great joy to all the people.” Luke 2:10

Christmas Eve – ah! The excitement! The waiting! The joy! Christmas Eve is a time of anticipation, reflection, and joyous celebration. It is the day before the celebration of the birth of the Christ Child. For many Christians, it includes special meals, church services, and the exchange of gifts. We are about to receive our gift . . . the best gift of all . . . Jesus Christ! What does that have to do with joy? We read in Luke’s birth narrative, Luke 2:10 , “The angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I am bringing you good news that will be a great joy to all the people.’ ” There it is again; that word joy. In this devotional, I want to explore the meaning of joy as I have come to understand it.

“There ain’t nothing gonna steal my joy – no, there ain’t nothing gonna steal my joy!” Those words from the toe-tapping energetic song by Zach Williams are taken from the song “Old Church Choir.” You can’t help but sing along with it. When you have true joy in your life, it’s true: no one can take it from you. I used to think happiness was synonymous with joy. After all, when you’re happy, you’re joyful. As a result of participating in several Bible studies here at Bethel, I learned there is a significant difference between happiness and joy. In the words of Billy Graham: “Happiness is fleeting and superficial, while joy is lasting and content. Joy comes from heeding God’s word and being content with whatever life brings.” We experience happiness when things are going well – our health is good, our bills are all paid, our children are doing well in school, etc. But that happiness can quickly fade when our health starts to fail, our bills cannot be paid, or our children struggle in school. Even when we feel our lives are in a downward spiral, the feeling of joy will still remain: **joy is the confident knowledge that God’s goodness will always sustain us, even in the valleys in our lives.**

As Meg Bucher wrote in her article “The Beauty of Seeking Both Joy and Happiness in Christ” (July 2023): “Happiness is a reaction to **something** great. Joy is the product of **someone** great.” That makes so much sense. You will never know joy unless you know Jesus. When our lives seem to be falling apart and we place our situation into the hands of Jesus, that is joy! We know that everything is going to be alright. On Christmas Day, the day Jesus came into the world, we celebrate Him. This celebration has been taking place for over 2,000 years, during which time Jesus has been making a difference in the lives of humans. The arrival of Jesus has influenced human culture in the areas of art, architecture, literature, politics, economics, society, religion, and music. Many examples of instrumental, classical, and choral music have been created to express the importance of finding true joy in Jesus. Have you ever noticed the prominence of the

words joy or rejoice in the Christmas carols we sing? Here are some examples:

“Joy to the World, the Lord is Come!”

In “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen,” we sing of “tidings of comfort and joy.”

The advent carol, “O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” ends with “Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.”

In “Good Christian Friends Rejoice,” we sing, “Rejoice with heart and soul and voice . . . Jesus Christ is born today!”

In “Angels We Have Heard On High,” the question is asked, “Shepherds, why this jubilee: Why your joyous strains prolong?”

In “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing,” the words “Joyful, all ye nations rise” are sung.

In “There’s a Song in the Air,” we proclaim, “There’s a tumult of joy o’er the wonderful birth”.

It is not a coincidence that the songs we sing at Christmas are filled with expressions of joy! Getting to know Jesus and trusting in Him couldn’t have happened if God had not sent Him to walk among us. Tonight at midnight the season of Advent ends and the season of Christmas begins. Take time to thank God for sending His precious son, Jesus. Ask God to help you develop (or sustain) your relationship with Jesus Christ so you will experience a true sense of joy!

Heavenly Father, on this holy night we give You thanks for the gift of Your precious son, our Lord and Savior, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. The gift of Your son Jesus is one we may never fully understand, but we do know our lives have been changed by knowing Him. Lead us in ways to better know Him, so we can experience true joy! In Your son’s holy name, Amen.

Gayle Ferrell



December 25

Christmas Day

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. Luke 2:1-7

It is interesting how many stories in the Bible involve travel. When travel was necessary, it was not something casually considered. It was challenging, intentional, fraught with obstacles and often an act that involved great danger. The fact that the Bible brings up the theme of travel so many times highlights that it must be a spiritual act.

First off, it is a spiritual act because all things are spiritual acts. Christians often talk about being called somewhere, or following God, Jesus, or church leaders. We travel in a literal sense, but our very lives are best understood with a metaphorical understanding of where it seems we are going. We can move away, or towards God's light. We can take on the "journey" of being a parent or a student. We may find ourselves in a profession that feels like a journey, and we may realize - as I have - that God places us on a professional path on purpose.

I have heard the voice of God in my life, exactly one time. I do not mean that I discerned his intention, or had a member of the Church guide me, or give me advice with God as the source. I mean to say that I audibly heard God actually speak to me exactly one time.

The questions I asked were completely oriented to what I was supposed to do with my life. The answers I received were answers of guidance, encouragement, and peace. Now, God did not tell me what to do, or where to go but how to travel. I would like to think, over the years I have tried to not just receive his word, but embody his advice. I hesitate to tell people what choices to make, or goals to establish (as we never reach the horizon anyway) but how to travel.

This Advent season, reflect less on where you travel, and more on how. God is not concerned with whether or not you travel to Texas, or Pennsylvania, or Florida to see family. God is not concerned with whether or not they come to see you. God is concerned with how we travel.

God is not on the distant horizon, He is with us on the road. This means, we will find peace where we are, right now, not on the distant horizon. This means we should give people hope on their travels, not engage in the illusion that hope exists on the horizon. This means we should find joy in our fellowship on the road, whether the person travels with us, or we pass them in our travels.

Heavenly Father, thank You for traveling with us. Our requests during worship for "Safe Travels" may have become so common that they may lose their meaning, but we know You always hear us. We know that You are with us, and our family, and our friends. You guide us through good times and bad. You are the Wonderful Counselor, and You are with us at all times, not just guiding us to You, but showing us how to care for, and guide others. Amen.

Matt Gibson



Merry Christmas

December 26

Love: The Gifts

The Spirit has given each of us a special way of serving others. Some of us can speak with wisdom, while others can speak with knowledge, but these gifts come from the same Spirit. To others the Spirit has given great faith or the power to heal the sick or the power to work mighty miracles. Some of us are prophets, and some of us recognize when God's Spirit is present. Others can speak different kinds of languages, and still others can tell what these languages mean. But it is the Spirit who does all this and decides which gifts to give to each of us. 1 Corinthians 12:7-11



Paul writes about how the Spirit gives gifts to every member of the community of faith. Before we became Christians, we did not have these spiritual gifts which gives us the ability to serve. Christ assigns ministries for every member of the body. These are opportunities for service wherever we are, at whatever age we may be, shared with those where we are in any given moment, within any situation.

Jesus Christ opens us to the opportunity. We must take it!

For many years I have been involved at Thanksgiving and Christmas, where I shared a meal, served a meal, or shared a word with few or many...even in sharing the representation of the birth of the Christ child in a Living Nativity. Whether it was from Virginia to Georgia to Texas, or from Germany to Korea to the Azores, I have shared a word and a breaking of bread in thanksgiving and in Christ's name. I look back on all those events and know it was not me who took to each one, nor my self-made abilities to perform each one. But rather it was God's Spirit which took me there and gave me those abilities, the confidence, and in some, or maybe all cases, the patience to be there and do there what I did, what we all did...as it took many of us with the abilities God gave each one of us to be there for others and one another.

Dear Father, teach us that the church is not an organization brought into being just to operate on its own, but as a church given a variety of ways to serve. Make us understand the church consists of ALL those who have truly been born of the Spirit, also of those who want to know more about that Spirit. Let us feel this living body, see it grow and develop to greet others, to offer others our divinely gifted collective gifts. Amen.

Don Otey

December 27 Love: The Gifts

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:6-7

I love Christmas and the time leading up to it. However, there is a certain amount of stress surrounding Christmas, and that verse helps a lot. To be honest, by the time the 27th of December rolls around I'm letting out a small sigh of relief.

The gift buying has been completed. That worry whether the other person would like the gift is now in the past. Discussions of who to visit, when to leave, how long to stay and just how we're going to get there has now been worked out or not. My late dad's birthday had been the day before on the 26th, and we'd typically visit my folks that day, too. Additionally, I'd probably fought some of the Walmart crowd trying to return things. So yes, by the 27th, I am letting out a sigh of relief.

I know as my wife reads this she's going to be thinking: "Wait-most of those things are what I do. You're eating and watching football." She'd be absolutely right, but it's my devotional and she has her own. For me, it's also that time where I'm past worrying about what I ate and the plans for a new diet commitment are a still week away. It's kind of a guilt-free food time; those of you who have struggled with your weight like I have, know what I mean. Plus there's all those leftovers in the fridge, and it would be a sin to let those go to waste.

Before retirement, the 27th was typically a workday. With a lot of people still on holiday, traffic would be light and the office was quiet. My coworkers would share how their Christmas was, what they did, who they'd seen, what they got, etc.

It's my prayer that everyone had a wonderful Christmas.

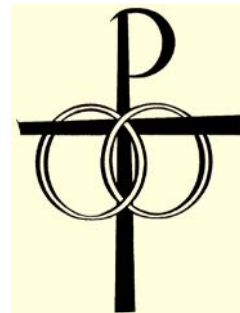
Thank You Lord for being with me during both a joyful and somewhat stressful time. And I really like that new Amen.

Bill Nelson



December 28

Love: The Gifts



Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Creator of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. James 1:17

Advent and Christmas are exhausting and exhilarating liturgical seasons. I gave no deep thought to how that would impact my family when I called home early autumn 1966 with a change of plans. I was engaged and the wedding had been set for June 1967. My future husband, Dick Johns, and I were both in seminary in New Jersey. For a variety of reasons we wanted to up the date—just a little. How would December 28, 1966 work?

I don't think that was a question so much as a request. My father was serving as pastor in a congregation in Odessa, Texas. My mother was the epitome of a pastor's wife: supportive and I involved. My family was mostly scattered around the country. In short, a Christmas wedding was challenging. Adding to those factors was the reality that I would do next-to-nothing to plan the wedding. One exception was my determination to make my wedding dress. I used the machine of an aunt who lived near the seminary. She and her husband would not be able to travel to Texas for the wedding so being able to share the creation of the wedding dress and then modeling it increased my excitement and sense that something big was happening in my life. But choosing invitations, and then addressing, stamping, mailing them, arranging for a rehearsal dinner, and the hundreds of other details were being handled by my family. Dick and I attended classes, wrote papers, studied for tests, and took occasional breaks. I arrived in Odessa in time to choose flowers, celebrate Christmas, and introduce Dick to my parents two days before the wedding.

The busyness of the season did not stop my family from rallying around Dick and me to bring the wedding into reality. In retrospect I realized the great gift Dick's and my families gave us. Their generosity of time and presence were perfect gifts. They put aside their plans, without complaining, to bless our wedding and signal their support for our marriage. That came from experiencing love in their lives which they were sharing with us.

December 28, 2024 is the 58th anniversary of my marriage to Dick. The length of our marriage is due in part to the unseen ways family and friends have surrounded us with love and support, in the mundane and in times of challenge. 1 John 4 makes clear how God's love is made evident in our relationships—in ways greater than we can comprehend. Verse 19 puts that succinctly: "We love because God first loved us."

God of love, we praise You for the ways You make Your love visible. Help us to receive love in whatever form it comes to us, so we will share it lavishly with all. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Louise Stowe-Johns

December 29

New Year and Epiphany

I've said these things to you so that you will have peace in me. In the world you have distress. But be encouraged! I have conquered the world. John 16:33

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more: grief, crying, and pain will be no more, because the previous things have passed away. Revelation 21:4

In this fast paced, hi-tech world we in which we live, it is easy to become consumed with fear and uneasiness. Seeking instant gratification and our own pride, we often are led astray into harmful and self-destructive behaviors. Our nation is divided and there is unwarranted hatred towards our brothers and sisters. Anxiety, depression and addictions are at epidemic proportions never seen before. Wars are occurring around the globe with brutal political leaders abusing innocent people. It has become too painful to watch the news anymore and social media continues to erode our minds with filth and false information. It almost seems hopeless.

This is not the scenario if you have accepted Jesus as your Lord and Savior. He is the Prince of Peace who has conquered this world and there is only peace and rest in knowing Him. The burdens we all carry without Jesus keep us in a state of slavery to this world and our own flesh. I find tremendous freedom, joy, and hope knowing my God is sovereign over everything in this world, regardless of who is in power. My God is the King of Kings, the Alpha and Omega. Leaders will come and go as seen throughout history, but Jesus will reign forever. I find that comforting and it only makes me want to learn more about the good news of the gospel.

If you have accepted this amazing gift of an invitation from Jesus to allow Him into your heart, there is no fear and anxiety in these turbulent times we are living in. He protects us and guides our path. Until we submit that He is Lord and King and is in control, we will never find true peace and hope. His Kingdom will be nothing like this world. As for me, I've given up being a slave to this world and have become a slave to Him.

Lord, I pray that by our faith and good works others will find their way to You. These lost sheep will turn away from their own desires and evil of this world and will come home to You. For only You have the path to righteousness and eternal happiness. Amen.

Dan Janickey



December 30

New Year and Epiphany

And the captain of the LORD'S army said to Joshua, "Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy." And Joshua did so. Joshua 5:15

While I was writing the devotion for the youth group on the battle of Jericho, I uncovered the above scripture that got me all excited. I researched the scripture on Google and found several schools of thought. Some say the captain was Michael the archangel and other people said he was Jesus. I don't remember an angel ever using that phrase: "Remove your sandals for you stand on holy ground." The only other place is when Moses encounters the burning bush. I was convinced it was Jesus. I finally had my message prepared when I asked the Lord, "Anything else?" God replied with a single word, "Rahab." So I thought about Rahab's story.

I knew she had been the prostitute who sheltered the two spies sent by Joshua to Jericho. She made the spies promise to save her and her family. I looked in the old Testament genealogies and confirmed Rahab was in the line of Jesus. And I got so tickled because I realized Jesus went to Jericho to save his great (many times) grandmother and the line of David. Otherwise the path taken by Mary and Joseph may never have occurred. Can I get an AMEN?

Dear God, You know all things, especially the past, present and future. How wonderful that You came down, as a small child, to save us from our sins. May the peace of God that passes all understanding guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Debbie Mroczek



December 31

New Year's Eve

As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" Luke 24:28-32

It's New Year's Eve. A perfect time to look ahead with hope. Hope for the world. Hope for our country. Hope for our families and friends. Hope for ourselves.

My hope is that your heart and mine burn within us as we consider ways in which we can bring Jesus' light into a dark and hurting world. In the entire Road to Emmaus story above (Luke 24:13-35), Jesus walked and chatted with two men who were leaving Jerusalem and walking to Emmaus. They talked at length about the events of the past couple of days, and yet had no idea it was Jesus who was walking with them. They assumed he was just a guy who had been to Jerusalem and had witnessed Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Little did they know....

I think of all the times in my own life when I assumed things and found myself on the wrong side of an assumption. Many times I missed opportunities to help someone, to be present with someone, to understand another person's point of view, or to really see or hear someone when all they needed was to be seen or heard. Sadly, I was in my own little world when all I had to do was open my eyes and listen, and pay attention to that burning in my own heart. And yes, many times I did feel that burning, but I ignored it because I was busy doing something else.

The new year is a perfect time to begin fresh to pay closer attention to what God may be trying to teach us. Put the phone down, turn off the TV, stop talking, stop scrolling, and just listen. Jesus calls us to love one another. The prophet, Micah, instructs us how: *"Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God"* Micah 6:8.

As 2025 begins tomorrow, I'm going to try to listen and love more boldly and intentionally. I'm going to work to be more mindful of my surroundings, and of those around me. To be sure, if Jesus comes walking alongside me, I want to recognize him and feel that burn. Happy New Year!

Holy God, as I begin a new year, help me to re-commit myself to be Your faithful servant by loving passionately, caring deeply, and giving generously. Amen.

Pat Martin

January 1

New Year's Day

Godwink Stories from my Life: *An event or personal experience, often identified as coincidence, so astonishing that it is seen as a sign of divine intervention, especially when perceived as the answer to a prayer. Those are moments we feel touched by God in a unique and unexpected way – as if God were winking at us.*

My Dad had a Purple Heart, was a German POW, and has a marker in Arlington Cemetery. My dad joined the service late in 1942 and was stateside until August of 1943. My mom discovered she was pregnant and wanted him to rethink the entire thing and come home. However, the military doesn't work like that. He eventually ended up in the United Kingdom about August 1943 and took flights over Germany and then returned to base. My dad loved the adventure, learned to fly a plane, and always volunteered to take extra flights whenever he could. His military assignment was gunner on a B-17. He flew with the same group of guys, but often ended up on other flights because he loved the flying so much. On an eventful day in September 1943, his crew flew out, but he was grounded because he'd done too much flight time. No one came back from that operation, and my dad was devastated for the rest of his life over wondering why he was saved. He went out on the very next flight, was shot down over Germany, and captured as a POW. Because his records were still with the original flight crew that was lost, my mom received a series of letters and telegrams that my dad was shot down and presumed dead. They cancelled her benefit checks and she had to quit her job and move back with her parents as she got bigger with me. First the many condolence letters and telegrams arrived, then the letters saying her checks would end, but she could apply for widow's benefits. The letters kept up through October and November and then in December, a Hamm radio operator contacted my mom to tell her my dad was alive and on a POW list put out by the German government. My mom wasn't sure what to believe. Then she received a postcard right at Christmas time with my dad's signature on it. It was from a German prison camp and as a Christmas gesture and probably because the War was not going in their favor, the commandant had allowed each prisoner to sign their name to a plain postcard and then amazingly, the postcards were mailed. My mom wrote to the Army telling them what happened and sending them the card as proof and in January 1944, the Army sent another letter telling her that my dad was alive. I was born the end of December. The camp was liberated in the Spring of 1945, but he still couldn't come home until I was almost one. My mom wrote to the families of that crew that was lost for years in hopes of hearing some good news, but none of them were ever found. My dad never got over it, never talked about the war, and I didn't find out any of this until I was grown.

When I was little, my dad saved my life in the ocean when a wave swept me off my raft. He remembered it vividly. I opened my eyes and didn't feel afraid, but for some reason I put up my arm and that's how my dad found me and pulled me out. He said if I hadn't put my arm up, he would never have seen me.

When I was pregnant with my youngest, Bill came home from work, looking really bad – grey looking and telling me he just didn't feel right. I called Bill's brother who is a doctor and he had a colleague meet us at Fairfax Hospital. They checked Bill out and told me I could take him home because they couldn't find anything wrong. Somewhere, I found my voice of resistance (and at that time, it was very strange for me to speak up) and told them I would not take him home, that something was wrong and they needed to check more to find out what it was. It turned out he had a blood clot just outside his lung and if I'd taken him home, he probably would have

died. Lots of chaos ensued and they immediately put him in a room and started him on blood thinners. Bill was in a room with a Catholic guy who bragged and bragged about how supportive his church was and that the priest would be there soon and he kind of made fun of Bill being a Methodist. However, our minister was the first one to show up to visit.

Shortly after the episode with Bill, a woman at our church, Sue, asked for prayers for healing of cancer. A miracle happened and she was temporarily healed. I believed it. When I went to visit her near the end, I've never forgotten the amazing feelings that were wrapped up in this experience. It's the reason I kept going to church. Sue and I weren't even that close but she always challenged me to stop being skeptical and get off the fence about my faith.

We decided in 2001 that we would hike the Grand Canyon. We'd gone there with my dad when the boys were young, but we only went a short distance and my dad got overheated and looked terrible. Not one to quit, he insisted on continuing, so I lied (the only time I lied to my father) and said I was sick and we had to get back up to the top. I felt bad about this for years, but shortly after this hike my dad had a massive heart attack and died. We talked about hiking the trail in memory of him. We spent a few days in Flagstaff getting used to the altitude and as we were driving down a road, I saw an elderly man walking and commented that they really have hardy folk out here for such an old man hiking down the road. Shortly after, I found out that the local nursing home was missing a resident. I ran in and asked if someone could come with me and I'd drive back down the road to find the man we had just seen. A nurse agreed to come with me. Sure enough, it was their missing guy.

Then, we hiked the Grand Canyon. Halfway down, a ranger told us to go back, that we'd started too late and would die out there in the heat (an unusually hot May, when we expected cooler weather). My friend insisted he was just saying that because we were old (which we were), so we pressed on. By the time we reached the bottom, we were dehydrated and in very bad shape. We were welcomed by strangers who put us in showers and gave us water and helped us to recover. It was amazing, and as more people came down, we did the same for them – a family of strangers helping one another.

In 2023, I was diagnosed with stage 4 pancreatic cancer – pretty much a death sentence according to the little bit I'd heard about it— three to six months survival. Strangely, I wasn't as upset as I should have been. I realized that God had been with me throughout my life and that whatever happened, it would be ok. Again, this is not my normal state of being and it surprised me. Now, although I'm deteriorating and aware that I'm sick, I'm still here a year and a half later and trusting that God will carry me through this in His time. All these Godwink moments have brought me to this time of my life and I'm grateful for it all.

Father God, I don't pretend to know Your plans or Your mind, but this I do know. You are who You say You are and can do what You say You can do. We can't predict the future or know why things happen the way they do. Help us remember that You are always with us and trust in Your care. Amen.

Nancy Matthews

January 2 New Year and Epiphany

While they were watching, he was taken up into a cloud. They could not see him, but as he went up, they kept looking up into the sky. Suddenly two men dressed in white clothes were standing there beside them. They said, "Why are you men from Galilee standing here and looking up into the sky? Jesus has been taken to heaven. But he will come back in the same way you have seen him go." Acts 1:9-11

My dream from a Christmas season years ago: It is a cold winter day, and I appear to be floating. I float through white fluffy clouds, until I find myself walking up to a door. I open it and step in... it's a huge mailroom filled with mail of all sorts and boxes and packages of all shapes and sizes. People are here; workers are scurrying around sorting those parcels. They are very efficient, like in a state of perfect routine. I realize those packages are Christmas paper wrapped, the mail in colorful envelopes, greens and reds, all with Christmas stamps. Just as I wonder where I am a worker floats up through the ceiling, only the ceiling is now another cloud. I watch as another, then another, does the same.

Then I float up. The others below continue their work, ignoring the people floating up, ignoring me as I float up. I come to a room where there is one person, one man standing in the corner of that very barren room. "May I help you?" he softly calls out. "Yes, where is this place? Where am I?" I ask. "Come with me," the man calls as he walks to a lone door. He turns with his hand on the gold doorknob. The man is pleasant and cordial, relaxed, wearing jeans and sandals. "You are on my doorstep now." I find myself in awe, not knowing why as I walk up to him. He opens the door. I look out into the infinite expanse. Then I look back at Him, and I realize I am on His doorstep. I realize this is Heaven.

From scripture I know Christ's return is to be met with devotion to His mission given to each of us. His ascension to heaven gave us a mission, one much greater than any concerns here on earth. He gave us a path to walk and like the Apostles then, today we get distracted from our given mission. We can often feel helpless against this world. We have a tough time looking beyond our own immediate concerns. We easily go down other paths. But with the promise Jesus Christ will return as he left us, we must return to the path He gave us to fulfill. His return is certain. Our actions in the meantime need to be just as certain. Let us this season, and in the year's seasons to come...move forward on the path He has provided!

Dear Lord, You came to us on what we've come to know as Christmas Day. You will return to provide us a time known for happiness and peace...to those who have chosen to believe in You. In this season of Epiphany, enable us to take that belief and spread it amongst our loved ones and all we meet to help them know the Jesus Christ we know. Then they too can share in the joy of being on a different path, THE path, looking to heaven for Your imminent return. Amen.

Don Otey

January 3 New Year and Epiphany

Because they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route. Matthew 2:12

Part of the familiar Christmas story involves the Wise Men who followed the star to find Christ's birthplace. King Herod had instructed them to return to him, saying that he, too, wanted to worship the child, but Herod's true motive was to find and kill the child whom he saw as a threat to his Rome-backed reign over Israel. So, heeding the directions given to them in a dream, the Wise Men went home by another route and so Herod was left unaware of where to find the new baby.

Joseph, too, had a series of dreams at that time, warning him to leave Bethlehem with his family immediately and flee away from Israel to Egypt. Finding another way home for the Wise men and finding the route to a new country for Joseph must have presented huge challenges in those days, when there were no road signs, no access to a road atlas, and certainly no access to precise GPS directions that we enjoy now.

Do we ever find ourselves "lost," in desperate need of a road map or clear directions for our life? This past year was a very difficult one for me, as I saw my husband's incurable, progressive illness advancing. Even though I knew how his earthly story would end, his death has left me reeling. I feel unmoored, confused, and unable to focus on tasks at hand. I'm also very aware that many others in our church family have also recently lost their loved ones and are navigating new challenges.

We find ourselves having to find a very new path forward, without the love, support, and guidance of the loved ones we have lost. So what must we do? We need to stay anchored to the supports in our church family, practice our spiritual disciplines of reading and studying the Bible, maintain relationships with friends and family members, and prayerfully ask God to direct us as we move ahead. In the words of the famous hymn written by John Sammis with Daniel B. Towner in 1887, we need to "trust and obey."

Heavenly Father, we are so grateful for Your Holy Word, for our church leaders, and for our church family, who help us when we're feeling lost and in need of a new path. Please lead us along the right routes as we find our new paths in this New Year. We want to serve You and love one another. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Janet Miles



January 4 New Year and Epiphany

*When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.
Matthew 2:10*

While I have always been aware of Epiphany and the twelve days of Christmas, until 2018 it did not have a deep personal meaning for me. That year I was lucky enough to be in Nettuno, Italy during the first week of January. Since my husband didn't have to work on Saturday, we were going to do some sightseeing. Our plan was to hike up Mount Vesuvius and then drive to Herculaneum (an archeological site similar to Pompeii). Even though there was a language barrier with the desk clerk, we learned that Saturday was Epiphany and therefore a major holiday for Italy. Undeterred, we did as much internet research as possible and set out.

The first setback was with navigating to the trailhead at Mount Vesuvius. There was a discrepancy between the instructions that I had carefully written down using Google maps and the NAV system in the rental car. After a few stops and discussions, it seemed like we were finally heading in the right direction. Then when we were almost there, the road was closed by a gate with a huge sign (of course in Italian). Disappointing, we told ourselves. That's ok, we can spend more time at Herculaneum.

Once again, trouble with navigation ensued. We eventually got to where we thought it was, but we could not find an entrance. We were driving around this town and the traffic was crazy - speeding cars, weaving motorbikes, bicycles and pedestrians all sharing the small alleys. When Denali wrote in his journal that night, he described the traffic using his six-year old words (with an accompanying picture). After a time of incredibly stressful driving, we decided to try to go to Pompeii.

We drove relatively stress-free to Pompeii. There was well marked, inexpensive parking close to the entrance. Don and I were still on edge, and now Denali was hungry and grouchy. We walked up to the entrance and went in. The place was so awesome that our moods improved very quickly. We found a place to buy lunch and sat on a bench overlooking the ruins of Pompeii. Words don't do justice for the awe-inspiring moment. We toured Pompeii seeing so many incredible things. It turned out to be a wonderful day that I'll never forget.

That night while eating dinner at a cool seafood restaurant, I was so grateful to our Lord for not only keeping us safe but also allowing us to experience the Roman antiquities. Each year, as I fondly remember that day, I think about the three Wise Men trekking from the east following a star. We really know very little about them or their journey - only a few verses from the book of Matthew. What obstacles did they encounter in their quest to worship baby Jesus? Surely their faith was incredible.

*Thank you, God, for Your care and grace on the day that we still celebrate Magi.
Amen.*

Tammie Grogan



January 5

The Epiphany

My mouth is filled with God's praise. Let everything living bless Him, bless His holy name from now to eternity! Psalm 145:21

These words are David's profound affirmation to giving God all the glory. It is his heartfelt declaration of personal commitment to honor God in words. It is also a poem, one to imply responsibility and encouragement, to return the praise of the blessed holiness of our God. As God will have us do, as David expressed with his words, we must speak the praises of our Lord and encourage all around us to join in praise. It is 'our' worship, our group, our congregational response, not just an individual effort, to which we should celebrate God's goodness; for all believers to maintain a constant gratitude and worship the God who sustains us all.

These original words come to me in this Advent and Christmas season:

A Season to honor those we have known
A Season to honor family and friends
A Season to honor a love we all share
A Season to honor our one true God

We share joy with our family
We reflect, honor, and praise together
We give all praise to our God
Now, we Love as one

*Dear Father,
Our congregate souls beckon You in
Overfilled is our cup of love
Our adoration for You endures
Forever, we are Yours in holy reverence. Amen.*

Don Otey



The Epiphany-Postscript

James Taylor's song, [Home by Another Way](#), came to mind as soon as Pastor Nadeem shared the theme for Advent and Christmas with me. In his song, this popular musician and song writer reminds us that the call to the Magi to change their plans finds resonance in our own lives today. He sings:

“Maybe me and you can be wise guys too
And go home by another way.”

Several times in my life, I have had my plans disrupted and needed to choose another path to my destination. Most recently, living through a pandemic has provided most of humanity with this experience and its accompanying lessons.

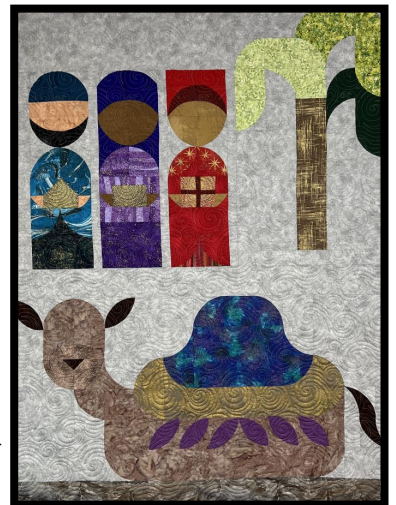
If we intend to seek out God in our midst and make a relationship with that God as our lifetime destination, we will need to recognize that “God’s ways are not our ways.” (Isaiah 55:8-9) We can make all the plans we want, and so we should, for life is not manageable otherwise. However, somewhere in the planning, it is going to be essential that we leave room for those plans to change.... sometimes quite radically. When that happens, when we get messages (in dreams, prayers, or more commonly from the wise people around us) telling us that we need to take another route, it is important to change course, trusting that God’s star will guide us.

As followers of the Christ Child, sometimes we need to take a different way because God is taking us out of harm’s way. Historically, those who follow stars often find themselves to be the object of the wrath of the power obsessed Herods of the world. But sometimes, we need to take a different way because God wants us to experience something we would not have experienced if we stayed on the highway. Alternate routes slow us down. They are winding. We have to pay more attention. This is a great metaphor for the spiritual life. It is about being brave. It is about trusting God. It is about surrendering our will to God’s will. It is about ultimately finding the right path to our final home which is to live in the heart of God.

For me, Epiphany is a reminder to follow stars, bow before my God, surrender my power, listen to the voices in dreams, and have the courage to be a “wise guy, too” and “go home a different way.” Happy New Year, everyone!

Credit to James Taylor and Christine Way Skinner

Rosanne Williamson



*Thank you for joining our Advent journey
to Christmas and the New Year.
May God bless our church
and your family in 2025.*



*Special thanks to Janet Miles and Gayle Ferrell for editing
and all who contributed.*