

Jubilee

An illustration of a winter scene. The background is a light blue sky filled with small white dots representing snow. In the foreground, there are three stylized trees with white trunks. Two are simple white shapes, and the one on the right is a larger, more detailed green tree. Several white birds are flying in the sky, some near the green tree.

A SEASON OF CELEBRATION

MEDITATIONS FOR THE ADVENT SEASON 2016
WESTOVER HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

PREFACE

Not long ago, I heard an interview with Norman Lear, the successful television writer and producer, now 94 years old. He was asked to what he attributed his continuing energy and creative engagement in public life. “Two words,” he said. “Over. Next.” Let go of what is over and done and look forward to what is next. “And, maybe,” he added, “put a little hammock in between.”

Over the past year, we have celebrated the 50th anniversary of Westover Hill’s sanctuary, our Jubilee, after the Hebrew notion of Jubilee year, which was to occur every 50 years and was to be a time of liberation and celebration. Our year began with the 2015 Advent booklet, which focused on sacred spaces, and built toward a grand day of worship and music and design, appropriately on All Saints Day. Now, in a final acknowledgement of this notable occasion in the life of our church, the Advent theme this year is *Jubilee: A Season of Celebration*. According to the Hebrews, in a Jubilee year, the fields were to lie fallow; to go unplowed and to rest. In keeping with this notion, we have let the creative imaginations of our writers lie fallow for a year (Sort of like getting to lie in Norman Lear’s hammock.) So instead of a collection of new entries, this booklet is compiled of meditations drawn from our church family, present and departed, over the last ten years.

This year’s offerings are arranged according to traditional themes of Advent - Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love, with meditations often in a context slightly apart from their original focus. Each week will open with a brief introduction to the theme, inviting you to read these thoughtful works with new eyes.

Our first 50 years in this sacred space are past. Now take this booklet to your hammock and quietly reflect on what lies ahead. There is restoration in these pages. Good News. But let the writings inspire visions of how we might grow at Westover Hills in the upcoming years. What is God up to now? As we enter the new church year, and another 50 years, what is our “Next”?

Sally Browder

WEEK ONE

HOPE

These have not seemed like hopeful days, what with the bitter rancor of our public discourse, the resurgence of hate speech and outbreaks of violence across our country and beyond. And every news account is a pinpoint on the map of where the church needs to be.

As you read this week's meditations, consider these questions stimulated by the words by our writers:

- Hope is often associated with light. How is light a metaphor or nature's reminder of our experience of hope?
- Hope may only gradually unfold. Is hope tied to patience?
- Hope may require a deliberate focusing of one's consciousness. Does prayer do this?
- Hope may entail living "as if". How can our imagination help us be hopeful?

Sunday, November 27

HOPE GROWN IN DARKNESS

I have a friend, probably in his mid-thirties, who is an inmate in one of our Arkansas prisons. He has a life sentence for sexually molesting children. The chances of his getting a parole are slim, especially since he is African American. If he should be granted one some years in the future, he will find it very hard to locate housing because of his criminal record. His grandmother, who was his chief emotional support, died a year or two ago. He never speaks of any other family members.

It would be very easy for a man in that situation to give up any hope. But as I have worked with him for the past few years I have been amazed to see two developments that bring hope to his life.

From prison he has organized, with some friends in the free world, a foundation named in honor of his grandmother who for many years worked in the kitchen of a public school in the delta section of our state. The poverty level is very high in that community. The goal of this foundation was to provide a \$500 scholarship to a graduate of that high school who wants to go to college. That sounds like so little in light of the cost of higher education these days. Yet it helped one student enroll. The second year they repeated the scholarship for a graduate from his hometown, and added two more of the same size in a neighboring town. Out of a situation that seems so hopeless, at least four students have had a boost as they climb out of an impoverished environment. And in helping them my friend has found a purpose in life as he faces countless years behind bars.

The second development he has shared with me is a commitment to spend two hours a day-from 4:00-6:00AM-in intercessory prayer for people or causes submitted to him by other prisoners. If you have someone, or some cause, you want lifted up in prayer, I can tell you how to send the name to him. This is a ministry he can carry on behind walls and barbed wire, and it can continue throughout his lifetime. He feels God has led him to make this commitment. There is another ray of hope that can shine in his darkness.

What is God calling you to do for others that can bring more hope to transform your life? However heavy your burden, or discouraging your situation, remember the story of the man in prison for life. It is in giving that we receive. And one blessing that comes to a giver is hope-for others, for meaning in the donor's life.

Don Campbell, II 2007

Monday, November 28

If at a young age, I had written the story of how my life would unfold from Advent season to Advent season, I would have (surprise, surprise) gotten it quite wrong. As a youngster, I had been bright with the hope of a fairytale life – of a knight scooping me up onto his horse and whisking me away to his castle to live happily ever after. If not that, I had the hope of a happy marriage lived out to its fullest onto the rocking-chair front porch on the mountain with gracious, thankful, obedient children and later grandchildren running hither and yon in the woods behind our well-lived in, but fairly tidy home on the hill. When those hopes were dashed – at least the rocking-chair mountainous ones – all my hopes were no longer bright, but rather dull and dormant, and life became day-to-day.

Then, one day, God reminded me of Psalm 121 and I read it with new hopeful eyes ...

“I lift my eyes to the hills, from whence does my hope come?
My hope comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.
My God will not let my foot be moved; she who keeps me will
not slumber, nor sleep. The Lord is my keeper and my shade.
The Lord keeps evil away from me and keeps my life. The
Lord keeps my going out and my coming in from this time on
and forevermore.”

With the Lord as my guide, I began following God’s path, always illuminated by the Holy Spirit and, Advent season by Advent season, my hope brightened as the realization of the direction in which God was leading me began to take shape. If, however, I thought I had it all figured out - once again, all hope darkened even after arriving where I believe God has called me to be. Once again, life happened and sucked the air out of my very being – and this time I was all alone ... except for the presence of my God.

And yet, I am still here because I’ve lifted my eyes to the hills again, knowing it is from God that not only my help, but my hope comes. God has spoken to me through you, reaffirming upon whose pathway I am walking, and reminding me whose child I am.

At this Advent season, we all anxiously await the remembrance of the birth of the Christ Child, knowing full well the pain, suffering, and death

that followed in the life of our Lord and Savior. But, we know, too, that Christ's resurrection followed his death, and therein lies all the hope we will ever need. For even in our darkest hours, because of Christ's resurrection, the hope of our own resurrection and eternal life rises within us and lifts us out of the valleys of darkness and into the light once again. We are able to pick ourselves up and dust ourselves off and begin again on a new day that is indeed bright with hope.

Susie Wiggins 2007

Tuesday, November 29

Bright eyes
Bright lights
Bright star
Bright hope

Christmas is filled with bright, twinkling things: the tree, the houses, candles, the eyes of children, grandmother's house. How many times we speak of the brightness of the season without mentioning the Hope that is within us.

A child hoping for the latest fad
A grandmother hoping the family will come this year
A spouse hoping the loved one noticed the hints
A parent hoping the money is enough

At the end, some wishes are fulfilled, some not. Tomorrow, the day after Christmas, all this is forgotten. We received.....so that's that.

But what remains? The hope that takes us through the year, through our lives and beyond. The hope that is built on nothing less.

In a recent children's sermon, Heather asked, "What was the Christmas gift that made your eyes light up? What gift did you want so much that you just said "wow"?"

One Christmas I wanted a cross necklace. It seemed the most important thing in the world. I'm sure I must have told Santa (mother), maybe, more than once. And 'wonder of wonders' it was under the tree on Christmas morning.

Do you remember what you wanted so much? You hoped and hoped that it would be under the tree and then it was. Why did we have hope and did our wishing so hard have anything to do with the outcome? No, it came from the goodness and love of parents wanting the best for us. But we hoped because we had faith in the ones looking out for our welfare. Our outcomes as Christians come from the goodness and love of our parent, God. The One we can trust to see that our hope for a bright ending is not denied.

Wednesday, November 30

The theme of this year's advent booklet, Bright with Hope, reminds me of the joyful feeling the Wise Men and others must have had on that first Christmas so long ago. How Bright with Hope they must have been as they heard the news of the birth of the Christ child. Hope is a feeling we all long for. It is something within us that assures us that the future is open. Hope gives us the passion to undertake bold projects, and, for many people all over the world, Hope gives the courage to continue in the face of poverty, disease and starvation. Along with our faith, Hope enables us to live with obstacles, knowing that God is always present in the world.

We have many opportunities to be beacons of Hope in the lives of others. Imagine the Hope for a better life that our church members brought last month to the hurricane victims in Gautier, Mississippi. How Bright with Hope the residents of Chiapas must have been when our members shared their time and talents with them. The IHN provides food, lodging and Hope for a better future to many persons in need.

In this advent season, may we all be Bright with Hope – Hope for peace, for an end to war, for family harmony. May we be lights for each other, and may we plant seeds of Hope, nurture these seeds, and live our lives so that others may reap the benefit. May we light up our lives and the lives of those around us with Hope.

Charlotte Frith 2007

Thursday, December 1

Matthew 1:18-25

Imagine what it must have been like for Joseph to awaken from his dream...was he frightened? Exhilarated? Confused? Resolute? Did he know immediately what he must do, or did it take most of the day to come to grips with “she will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus”?

Have you ever woken up on the “wrong” side of the bed? On this day, so close to Christmas, I imagine what it must have been like for the pair of them, Mary and Joseph, as they traveled the slow and dusty road to Bethlehem to be counted, awakening each morning: a little closer to their destination, a little lower on supplies, a tad uncertain of the outcomes. Mary, awakening hungry or thirsty in the night, deeply sore from the traveling, sleep difficult because of the discomfort of being “great with child.” I wonder if they worried a little. I hope they were hopeful. And sometimes I dare to imagine the holy parents as a little more like me... that maybe just once they woke up a little less-than perfect.

Sometimes I think that Mary and Joseph must have awoken once, during that long walk and the rough ride on a back of a donkey, to a slightly dimmer outlook on the adventure; that at least once they had to decide what to do in the face of less-than-stellar faith. You know...a bad morning.

I like to think that they took their own fears and doubts and *chose* to continue walking towards the promise anyway, to get back in the saddle and ride *as if* they were completely assured of the angels’ prophecies, *as if* a rough awakening wouldn’t rule the day. They were human after all. But they also had a mission, and every step they took was a testimony to their hope despite what a single morning might have done. Rather, the important thing was the cumulative effect of all their awakenings; that each day they chose to act on their hope regardless of their doubts.

Have you ever woken up “on the wrong side of the bed?” Have you ever actually taken the advice to go “back to bed” and find the right side to wake up on? What would it mean to act *as if* you had no doubts? What would it mean to awaken in a bad mood...and act out of hope anyway?

Marie Mainard O’Connell 2013

Friday, December 2

O God of dark nights and distant stars, we too wait on this silent night, on this Christmas Eve. Many of us are weary, some of us are lonely, and all of us in some way are captive and broken. On this holy night, we desire more than we can bear to hope for, or even imagine. We long for the heavens to open and the angels to proclaim to us the triumph of light over darkness, of joy over sorrow, of peace over enmity, of hope over despair. Tonight, we are all children of hope. Give us the courage to desire great things. Hear now these our Christmas prayers.

Rev. Galen Guengerich, All Souls Church, 2005

submitted by Cecile Knight 2007

Saturday, December 3

He came to himself and said, "I will go to my Father." Luke 15:18

Jesus said, "If you bring forth what is within you, what you have will save you. If you do not have that within you, what you do not have will destroy you." Gospel of Thomas (a Gnostic gospel not included in the New Testament)

The Father said, "My child, you have been with me always; all that I have is yours. Luke 15:31.

Unfortunately, we did not come into this world with an "Owner's Manual" as we did when we purchased our last new automobile. For this reason, each of us has to find our own way. The way for me is probably not the way for others.

Well-meaning mentors: parents, Sunday School teachers, teachers from Kindergarten through college, coaches, and many others have given us directions to the best of their abilities. Many of these instructions were not in our best interests. Some of these well-meaning instructions we took as gospel/truth. In many cases (mine, for one) it took many years to put numerous of these outdated ideas behind us.

I think that each of us is searching for a relationship with God, whatever you call Him/Her.

The three scriptures mentioned above show us that a relationship with God is what we are seeking: "I will go to my Father." From Thomas, we learn that what we need is within each of us with the warning of what will happen if we do not bring that out. The third reference is that God the Father/Mother is telling us that we have been with them all the time and all they have is ours.

It seems to me that everything we need for the life we choose, we have had all this time. We just need to realize that and bring it out for our greater good.

I want to close with two of my favorite quotes: First, from renowned Motivator Tony Robbins: “Everything you need is already yours.” Second from Nelson Mandela: Our deepest fear is NOT that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us..... As we let our light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

As we celebrate this Advent season leading to the birth of Jesus, we can help others in their search as we continue seeking our own way. In this way, we are celebrating the true meaning of Christmas, leading us all to Hope for the present and the future.

Carl Glenn 2010

WEEK 2

PEACE

Peace comes and goes, we say. Perhaps the elusive nature of peace is due to its paradoxical nature. It seems to be both an absence and a presence. It can mean a laying down of cares and yet it can entail a taking on of hard-won struggles. Peace is an inward focusing and at the same time it is an attentiveness inexorably tied to our connectedness to others.

As you meditate upon Peace this week, consider how the readings encourage a turning in as well as a turning outward. Be aware of the compelling power of Peace to draw us into action, to be willing implements of God's work in the world. And then reflect on how you experience the breaking through of the Presence of God in your life as, in the words of the old hymn, "a settled rest."

Sunday, December 4

“In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night” (Luke 2: 8, NRSV).

In December 1944, my field artillery battalion was stationed in England, living in an old silk mills in Congleton, Cheshire, that had been converted into barracks. I spent Christmas Eve of 1944 on guard duty in front of our barracks buildings, two hours on and four hours off. That Christmas Eve in Congleton, the ground was frozen hard; and a bitter cold seeped in through my warmest winter woolens. Even though I kept moving about, I did a lot of shivering.

There were civilian homes near our barracks; and English civilians were in our area all the time. On Christmas Eve, some young boys came along caroling. At first I could hear them in the distance; then I heard them coming closer and closer. They stopped in front of one of our barracks buildings and sang for the American soldiers inside. One boy, whose voice had not changed, gave a beautiful solo number. The soldiers took up a collection of candy bars and gave them to that boy. I heard him responding with enthusiasm: “O thank you, sir. Thank you very much.” After the boys had divided up the candy bars, they went further down the street. I heard them singing the same carols again, in the distance; and their star singer repeated his same solo number (to the tune of “Winchester Old”):

“While shepherds watched their flocks by night,
All seated on the ground,
The angel of the Lord came down,
And glory shone around.”

I was deeply moved to hear those words being sung while I was on guard duty in England on Christmas Eve, 1944. For I, too, was “keeping watch . . . by night.” I felt very close to the shepherds of the Christmas story. And what they experienced on the first Christmas Eve became very real for me.

I sent a copy of what I quoted above to Kathleen, a distant relative who resides in Blackburn, England. Kathleen contacted the editor of the Congleton Chronicle; after corresponding with me, he wrote an article, “GI’s military memories of a Christmas in Congleton, 1944,” for that paper’s December 30, 2008, issue. The editor printed my Advent meditation in full, along with a 1944 picture of me in my Army uniform and a photograph of the Congleton street where our barracks stood.

I had written to the editor, “I wonder whether any of the carol singers are still around from that evening.” But I actually doubted whether

continued

any of them could be located, 64 years later. So I was greatly surprised when I learned that they had indeed been identified. A woman who read the newspaper article was reminded of her brother, named John; and she telephoned him. When John's sister told him about the article, he immediately realized that he had been the solo singer. John later related that there had been four carolers, of whom only John and a friend named Colin were still living in 2008. On Christmas Eve of 1944, John had been nine, one of six young children whose father had recently died. Now, in 2008, John was 73.

A second surprise to me was that John, in 2008, had detailed memories of singing that solo number, 64 years earlier. I had not anticipated that. But singing that solo number had meant much more to him than I could have imagined. After the telephone call from his sister, John went out and purchased a copy of the newspaper; then, as he read the article, tears came to his eyes. John's father, serving in the British Army's Royal Artillery Regiment, had been killed in action in France in October 1944; and on Christmas Eve of 1944, John was still actively grieving. While he and his companions were caroling, John suddenly felt that he had to sing some verses alone, and it was as if his father was telling him to do so.

A third surprise to me was that John remembered seeing me on my Christmas Eve guard duty and he recognized my face from my picture in the Chronicle. In fact, John even remembered a detail that I had forgotten: apparently I opened the door to our barracks, so that the soldiers inside could hear the caroling better. And those soldiers, whose door I had opened, were the ones who gave candy to the carolers.

John has conversed by telephone with my English relative, Kathleen. He has also corresponded with me, and he has sent me a photograph of himself standing in front of my old barracks building, now used by a stonemason. John has shared with us other memories of how kind the American soldiers were, including cooks in our battalion kitchen who sometimes gave food to the hungry neighborhood children. According to John, "It was a Godsend when the Yanks came."

Perhaps my greatest surprise associated with all of this was my learning that I am not the only one who deeply cherishes the memory of that caroling in Congleton on Christmas Eve 1944: so does John the caroler. Human lives do indeed intersect with each other in more respects than we can measure; and our actions sometimes have impacts on the lives of other persons in many wonderful ways, of which we ourselves may be unaware.

Monday, December 5

BEING WITH GOD

I can feel the closeness of God almost anywhere.
But it's when I am with my family; or when I sit
before a warm fireplace; or watch a beautiful
snowfall or rainfall; or walk upon a beach;
or sit on a mountain top; or by a river's edge;
or experience the sacraments that I truly feel
the closeness of God.

It is at these times that reflections become so fresh,
so much more clear. I am at peace, and I thank God
for the multitude of blessings I have experienced in my life.

TRAVELS

Life's travels can take you down a dusty road
Maybe it is a rain slick road
Or perhaps a rocky road
God travels with you
He helps to lessen your load

So when our troubles are filled to the brim
Turn to Him...trust in Him
He is always there for you
He can help erase life's blues.

Tom Callaway 2014

Tuesday, December 6

Hanging up on a wall in my home is a 5 x 7 picture with the phrase from a Beatles song: “There are places I’ll remember”. The picture is of a view from a friend’s deck overlooking the White River. It was taken on a beautiful October day—pale blue sky; the leaves on the trees are turning into lush colors of blazing scarlet, deep gold, and mocha brown. On the deck there are two chairs, inviting one to come, sit, and drink in the view as the river meanders by.

Rivers have always drawn me to them—I guess that’s why I love living by the Arkansas River. Egrets, geese, a pelican or two, foxes, raccoons all share space with us humans along the river’s edge. It seems as if nature instinctively knows that water is God’s gift of life. The river ebbs and flows, courses madly some days, flows gently downstream on others. But the river is always there, inviting one to come, sit, play, frolic, or simply refresh your soul. Whenever I do go sit by the river, it’s usually when my mind is bursting to the seams: Where should I go? Am I where I am supposed to be? What am I really supposed to be doing with my life?

Which takes me back to the White River weekend. One morning my friends decided to go hiking, so I stayed back at the house as the river was calling to me. So, armed with a cup of tea, I went out and plopped into one of the deck chairs. My soul began to drink, starting with a sip. Birds were soaring overhead, the river sparkling as it danced along its way, the sunshine beamed, and my soul drank until it was overflowing with contentment and peace. And that’s when one of my favorite pieces of Scripture popped into my brain: “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10)

Be still and know that God has everything under control, that although things aren’t always perfect, God is always there. Life ebbs and flows, but God is ever present in the rocks, the cool water, the blue sky, the scarlet trees, inviting us to come sit by the river, be still, and relish all the gifts He has given us. Especially the best gift of all, His son, Jesus Christ.

Judi King 2015

Wednesday, December 7

THE JOURNEY

Matthew 2:1-12

The gospel of Matthew recounts the story of the wise men. We don't have much Biblical information about who they were or the details of their journey to find the one who had been born king of the Jews. There may have been three Magi who traveled together; the only clue is that there were three gifts given. The reader is not informed if the Magi were fulfilled after seeing Jesus or what happened on that journey home by a different route. We can only imagine how they spent their time, what they talked about, how they shared the experience of a lifetime; surely there was security and comfort being in a group instead of being alone on that journey.

We all undertake a variety of journeys at different stages in our lifetimes. It may be a quest for education, for wisdom to raise our children, or for knowledge to seek treatment for a medical condition. If we are fortunate, we have a friend to accompany us on our journey, to share the joys and the sorrows, and to offer strength or inspiration when times are tough. Like the Magi, we rarely know how long the journey will be or what obstacles will be encountered. We don't have a "star in the east" to guide us—oh, how much easier that might be! A true friend can certainly help keep us on course and make the journey so much more fulfilling.

Our faith must be the star that reminds us that there is a journey to be taken and work to be done. You never know what word or deed may have a life-changing effect on the next person you see. With a positive attitude and a hopeful heart, may we use our time to help others while we finish this journey to our Father's heavenly home.

Mary Flo Klein and Laura Whitmore 2010

Thursday, December 8

THE SACRED

Experiencing a sacred space is really a universal experience, even if one does not use the term sacred for it. The day, in Springfield, Illinois, when our family entered the home of Abraham Lincoln, and we saw that tall black hat on the hall tree, a thrill ran through my entire self and a hush fell over me. It seemed a holy moment, sacred somehow.

The day my grandmother was buried, my recollection tells me that I looked across a wide span of autumn colors, not trees, particularly, but fields of gold, and into the distance. There was the sense in that moment of those who have gone before and the connectedness in God we all share. Surely this was a sacred place, a sacred moment.

The place that one encounters the living God is surely holy ground. A sacred place in my memory is the old, old sanctuary of First Presbyterian, Conway, AR. The sacredness of it is seen and felt by me in a memory from youth of the Christmas program, the quiet and dark, light shining on the manger scene, flickering candles held aloft by worshippers, and then the music and the singing, "Joy to the World." I met Jesus there in those few moments.

One definition of a sacred space says, "At its most basic, it is a place which invites the contemplation of divine mystery and encourages an attitude of spiritual openness." (Santa Barbara Sacred Spaces, on the web)

We attended Cursillo at First UMC, Carthage, MO. It was a place with an experience that invited just such contemplation and where we encountered the living God. Sacred. Not long afterward, Battlefield Mall, Springfield, MO became sacred in a moment. I know, yes, a mall. "It is the people that make a space sacred" (Dating God – web site) explains the mall experience, for we ran into some new friends from another town whom we had met at Cursillo. Right then, that chill of recognition of holy ground revealed that wherever we are, God's people are. It is the people that make a mall-or anywhere - sacred.

All of us could tell about any number of sacred moments and sacred spaces throughout our lives, just with births, celebrations, worship experiences, deaths, realization of truths, and so on. It seems to me that the source of

sacredness is the recognition of it that comes from within, God within us. When we seek the sacredness within, we do contemplate the divine mystery; we do develop an attitude of spiritual openness; and we do see God in that sacred space.

Prayer: Holy God, in awe we contemplate the sacredness of the places we find you – or you find us. In awe, God, we grasp the sacredness of ourselves because you are within us. This is the mystery we live. Thanks be to God.

Marianne Estes 2015

Friday, December 9

ARRESTED BY THE FRENZY

To be arrested again and again
by the frenzy of life is inevitable.
I am captured by the seductions
of my senses at every moment.
The pain and glory and boredom
of every breath holds me in thrall.
These exist at the edges of who I am,
the boundaries of my skin.
Inside me is a room of silence
where all storms go calm at a whisper

OPEN ME

Open my eyes so I may see.
Open my ears so I may hear.
Open my hands so I may help.
Open my arms so I may embrace.
Open my mind so I may comprehend.
Open my heart so I may care.
Open my life so I may be who I already am.

H.K. Stewart 2011

Sacred spaces found in the present moment.

Start with conscious breathing, allowing thoughts to come and go without judgment, Breathe .

The brain will quieten to the nervous noise, relax into the breath, breathe deeply exhaling the body's tension; inhale the stillness surrounding you.

Bring to mind your Amazing God. Thank God for the presence of this sacred moment. Breathe deeply, allow random thoughts to pass.

As you continue to breathe, note past feelings of shame, anger, great sadness: breathe them away. Consider future feelings of anticipation, worry and fear; breathe and exhale future feelings away.

Listen for God's soft voice calling you BELOVED. Stay in the moment. Breathe deeply, exhale random thoughts.

Sacred spaces are found in every present moment, not in the past, nor in future moments. Breathe into your sacred space.

Donna LeBlanc 2015

Saturday, December 10

Luke 1:26-38

“Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee: Blessed art thou among women; And blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus,” Chanted by the Roman Catholic faithful through the centuries, this 11th century prayer has a 16th century addition: “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.” Mary was on the way to becoming the feminine figure in the Godhead.

Is Mary really that special? Is she more than human...more like a goddess than a teen-age girl? I see elevating Mary in that manner as a way of helping us to avoid OUR responsibilities. If Mary is more than human, we can afford to be less than Mary.

If, on the other hand, Mary is simply a teen-age peasant girl, then God has done something very special through her for us all. “Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you.... You shall bear a son.... He will be called the Son of the Most High.” This keeps us on the hook. The theme of our Advent booklet is “Awake! A New Morn!” Only God can bring in that new morn for this church and for our world. However, God has an annoying way of working through ordinary teen-age peasant girls and ordinary middle aged men and ordinary old retired people. All that it takes is people who are willing to say, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”

God is waiting for us to give that answer so that the Lord can bring in a new morn for this church and for our world; “for with God nothing will be impossible.”

*Prayer: O God, I am your servant; let it be to me according to your word.
Amen.*

Bill Branch 2013

WEEK THREE

JOY

Be prepared. The readings this week will grab you up and, as one writer offers, have you feeling the breath of the spirit and leaping to your feet, “maybe even with a little tap dance.” And this is a good week for dwelling on the joy we find in fellowship with our faith community, (where we stay so busy that, “There is too much to do, no time for pity”!)

We tend to think of joy, particularly at this time of year, as associated with receiving. Joy as gift. And of course it is. But as you read what is shared here, it is apparent that joy has to do with letting go and with letting in. With taking in everything. Be reminded that “Our hallelujah encompasses a wide sweep of happiness, sadness, gratitude and grief.”

So relish the week. And greet each morning, as one writer does, reciting the words of the Psalmist, “this is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

Sunday, December 11

During worship at Westover Hills, I often look up at the sanctuary ceiling. I follow the lines, those odd angles creating triangles and other shapes, but especially triangles. That sacred space has seen a lot of things, in services that mark the church year from Advent to Pentecost—what some call the “semester of the Lord”—and in other services and meetings that happen at various times during the “semester of the church” or whenever they happen to fall. Those things matter, to me, because I think they are what make spaces sacred. The architects, contractors, carpenters, and other folks who worked on the sanctuary didn’t make it sacred. They made it interesting. They put those angles in there. They caused those shapes to form in the ceiling. But whether they intended those shapes to have any special symbolism or not—triangles especially with their Trinitarian connections—what we and those who came before us have experienced in the almost-fifty years of that space—that’s what makes it sacred. Some can point to the place where they were standing when their child was baptized, some the place where they sat with a dying friend and where they stood to sing “For All the Saints” at that friend’s memorial service. If you’ve helped lead worship in that sanctuary, you may remember how nervous you felt the first time. This didn’t happen to me here, but the first time I was a liturgist I found the experience so unreal I had kind of an out-of-body experience sitting in that chancel waiting to do what I was supposed to do, helping in the liturgy, the “work of the people.” I had just gotten a new pair of shoes, and I looked down at them and said to myself (at least I hope I said it only to myself!), “Well, this must be me, because those are my new shoes, and they’re on what appear to be my feet.” I think about that every time I am a liturgist at Westover and always make a point of looking at my shoes just before I look up at the ceiling. You may remember being elected to a committee in a congregational meeting in that space, a committee you really didn’t want to be on but agreed to join because you just couldn’t bear to say no, again, but then found some remarkable thing about being on that committee that made you really glad you had agreed to be on it. You may remember glancing over at the face of a visitor you had invited to church and wondering if that person would ever come back after hearing the pastor say something particularly challenging, something you were glad to hear, but then knowing somehow your friend would never come back. And being OK with that because you’d rather everybody know this is an honest place and unashamed of the demands for justice required by the Gospels and the prophetic tradition in which Jesus stood and did his work and Frank does his. You may

remember that particularly powerful statement in a sermon or a great story or song or laughter or cries of delight over some good news or something else that hit that ceiling so hard it stuck—stuck in one of those odd shapes, maybe one of those triangles. And you may know that those good things are up there and that they are driven into the walls also and the floor and the pews and the pulpit, along with some painful ones, and that they have made this space sacred and that you will hear yourself crying out (maybe only to yourself, but maybe not), in the midst of the sweep of events in the semester of the Lord or the semester of the church, with their tangles of happiness and sadness and gratitude and grief, from age to age: Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah!

David Stricklin 2015

Monday, December 12

Westover Hills inspires me to greet each day with joy and a sense of purpose that fulfills all sadness I left behind.....

(With inspiration from the hymn, Awake! And greet the New Morn!)

Awake! Awake! and greet a new morn,
a soul without voice breaks forth into song.
The tears streaming down her face reflected her past.

She found the warm hearts of so many people
and drew closer to God in this wonderful Temple.
The Choir fills her soul with their heavenly voices
and she thanks God up above for his wonderful graces.

Westover Hills has been her salvation.
The fellowship she shares as she does for others
leaves her heart full of joy and a mind full of purpose.
She sheds no more tears as she stays very busy,
there is too much to do, no time for pity.

Mary Chrisman 2013

Tuesday, December 13

I like to think that no one can sneak up on me. I have an early warning system. (It runs on biscuits and ear scratching.)

This dog that shares my space has placed herself in charge of monitoring our household perimeter. I didn't train her to perform this service — it is her vocation, her calling. Even from sound sleep, she can launch into a snarling leap. (The postman no longer even flinches.) And when a friend is on the sidewalk, I am notified by the whoosh of a dog tail sweeping happily across the floor.

Some evenings I find her with her 80-pound self wedged between the curtain and the window, just looking out into the darkness. When I leave the house, she pulls back the drape with her nose and watches me go with disapproval. When I return home, she hears my car approach, flips back the curtain, and breaks into a full body wag complete with toenail tap dance.

This is not unusual dog behavior, I know. Yet I am struck by the observation that it never gets old for her. We're going on four years here and this is more than what the dog does, it's a substantial part of who she is. She is one who keeps watch.

Then I think about the advent of my 40-somethingth Christmas and how much time and energy I am inclined to devote to keeping watch — not much.

And how I'm much more likely to snarl than wag these days.

And how much the pursuits that fill my days are like a sound sleep, and whether in the midst of it I would even notice the arrival of a friend, much less leap to my feet in greeting.

I want to be paying enough attention to feel the breath of spirit, remember to look up for the star, and enthusiastically hand my most cherished resources to the new baby — maybe even with a little tap dance. I am glad for my 40-somethingth opportunity to wait, to watch, and to see it all anew.

Wednesday, December 14

Recently, I was west of town about an hour before sunrise, just before dawn was breaking. In the eastern sky, there were three prominent stars visible in close proximity to each other. The stars were three planets. Venus, Jupiter, and probably Mars. Venus is usually the biggest and brightest of the stars visible, and is usually only visible low in the western sky for an hour or two after sunset, or low in the eastern sky for an hour or two before sunrise. On this particular morning, Venus was unusually bright, probably a result of it being at its closest point to Earth. It looked a lot like the star of Bethlehem did that night over 2,000 years ago which heralded the birth of Jesus. I got to thinking about what the wise men thought when they saw the unusually brilliant star and were moved to follow it to the place where the baby Jesus was (Matthew 2:1-2, 9-10).

Seeing this brilliant star in the east, in close proximity to two other planets, and backed by the knowledge of what happened after the birth of Jesus, through his ministry on Earth, and especially his death and resurrection made me think about the whole life cycle of Jesus during his time on earth. While the brilliance of the star of Venus that morning reminded me of the birth of Jesus, I also got to thinking about the resurrection of Jesus which opened the door to our salvation if we believe in him and accept him as Lord and Savior. I had the feeling that morning that I was at home in the sacred place of being one of God's chosen children and could feel the Holy Spirit at work in renewing my faith journey. About a half hour later, as dawn was increasing, and daylight was taking over, I could only think of Psalm 118:24 which says, "This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it". On mornings when I do not feel like getting out of bed or have fears about what the new day may bring, I remind myself of this verse, and it helps get me going. Having seen over 23,300 days the Lord has made so far, my being home in the sacred place of being one of God's chosen enables me to rejoice and be glad in each of them.

John MacLeod 2015

Thursday, December 15

THE DEAD LEAF'S DANCE

"We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28, RSV)

For 22 years I had been working at the Easter Seal Rehabilitation Center, teaching art to orthopedically disabled children and mentally retarded adults. Through the performing and visual arts, I had helped my students to share their own thoughts and feelings, and to win recognition for their unique viewpoints. I knew that this work was what I was meant to do. Then, in the spring of 1989, my supervisor told that the new funding source for Easter Seals would not cover the cost of art classes, so the art program would soon have to end. I would have no job to give me identity, no students to share exciting new plans with, no place at which to use my God-given gifts. What would Jesus call me to do instead? I still did not know, and I hated the emptiness of not knowing. I went to a healing retreat to seek Jesus' comfort for the coming loss of my beloved job. He showed me a nature parable.

Early one morning at that retreat, I was walking alone down a path through the shaded woods. Ahead of me, a mysterious something was bobbing, spinning, and swinging in the air above the path. A shaft of sunlight spotlighted it, turning it golden. In silent awe, I watched that ever-changing dance. When I tiptoed closer, I saw that the mysterious something was a dry leaf fragment caught on the end of a long thread from a spider web. In the shaded woods I had not seen the thread, and now I was careful not to break it by touching it.

I felt that Jesus was telling me something. The leaf fragment had lost its connection to its parent tree, its job as a food factory, and even its identifying shape: it was just a nameless fragment. But it could dance in the air! It could move with every breath of air, because it was attached only to that long, invisible thread.

The dead leaf's dance became my symbol of new freedom after loss. Jesus was teaching me that, instead of depending on my career to give me an identity, I could depend on Him. I claimed the message of the dancing

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leaf, as I waited for God to lead me. The new work that the Holy Spirit inspired in me was the writing of a play about the healing of racism. My songwriting friend, Susan Walker, helped me to turn it into a Christian musical play, *The Healing Tree*. After eight months of dedicated work by a small African-American church and two small white churches—and volunteers from several other churches—*The Healing Tree* was performed in the spring of 1993.

Mary Frothingham 2014

Friday, December 16

The folk still needing vast amounts of help and who live along the hurricane-ravaged Gulf Coast wait. While many areas are well on their way to recovery, the 'least of the least' anticipate the coming of...what? Another storm? Another day full of promises never kept? Another grant that did not materialize? Many of them have resorted to skepticism and low expectations - it's easier to accept rather than another disappointment. Prophets and wise men and kings and humble folk also waited for the long expected savior to come into their lives. There were many different emotions driving their anticipation – wonder, fulfillment, joy, dread.

Why did God choose to enter the world when He did? It is probably one of those mysteries of life that philosophers and theologians like to ponder. Why does God intervene in any life? Who knows, but when He chooses to, it makes a difference to the parties involved.

My story is not the usual Advent story. It is a chilling tale in many ways, but one that illustrates man's waiting and God's intervention. One of the team leaders at the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance Orange Grove #3 Camp in Gulfport, Mississippi quietly told us a story about an encounter that he had with God. He and a group of volunteers came to the Gulf Coast in October 2005, about a month after the area was devastated by Hurricane Katrina. At that point their daily work assignments dealt with 'mucking out' the houses that had water and debris washed into them. They went to a home and knocked on the door. They were greeted by an elderly man who was clearly surprised at their presence, but allowed them in to do their work. When the team finished their job and was preparing to leave, the man went to the team leader and asked why they came to his house. The team leader told him that the man's home was next on their list and that he was sorry that it had taken so long to get to him. The man asked to see the list and then commented that he had not applied for help and the home that was on the list was four blocks behind them. The team leader said that God must have directed them to the house for a purpose. The old man broke down crying and said that for a month they had waited for help to come and had decided that if help didn't arrive that day, he and his wife didn't want to go on living – "That's why you're here." In many ways like the widow of Zarephath who was down to her

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last meal when God intervened through a visit by Elisha, the elderly man and his wife were preparing to live one last day. You could have heard a pin drop and then we all erupted into proclamations of joy and praising God. Just like long ago when God chose to intervene in the world and the world hasn't been the same since then.

Pray for the 'least of the least'. It may be the only hope they have.

Ray Stephens 2008

Saturday, December 17

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.
--Isaiah 9:2*

At one time or another we have all walked in darkness. It may have been the threatening darkness of fear for the health or safety of a loved one or of oneself; the dense fog of doubt or suspicion; the murky morass of betrayal and infidelity; the blackness of depression due to death or loss of some kind; the dark anxiety of uncertainty about the future. Whatever the cause, we all know what it is like to dwell in the darkness, to be surrounded and enveloped by it, while we wait with hope and trust that the light to break through.

And those of us who know the Triune God—Creating Parent, Merciful Redeemer, and Empowering Sustainer—trust that God's light will eventually pierce the gloom and surprise us with its shining. God's light comes to us in all sorts of unexpected ways—sometimes through events and happenings but more often through other people. It always comes on God's schedule and not at our demand, and the waiting is hard on us and for us. But when the light comes, it usually astounds us with what it does to and means for our lives.

I have experienced the darkness and the surprising light of God's love and grace in my life more times than I have space here to recount them. But I will share one of the many. When my husband decided after twenty-nine years of marriage that he wanted out, I was catapulted into the darkness of grief, depression, and anxiety about the future. I had married at the age of nineteen and so had never lived on my own nor been the primary wage earner. At the time of the divorce I was working as a church educator, without benefits or health insurance and at a minimum salary. We still had one child living at home, a son who was a sophomore in high school. All through the months of separation, a six-week attempt at reconciliation, and the weeks before and after we filed for divorce, I prayed and prayed for God to show me what I should do with the rest of my life. This entire time was a period of intense emotional pain that hurt just as much as physical pain does.

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God's light came first as a tiny ray through the voice of my minister who began talking with me about going to seminary. I couldn't bear the idea when he first mentioned it because it was too drastic and demanded too great a change in my life. But he wisely let the spark he had ignited sputter and begin to glow. Its beam grew brighter with the encouragement of my children, other family members, and friends. Within a year my son and I found ourselves living in an apartment in Austin with me in seminary and him starting his junior year. God's light showed the way for me—for both of us—to start a whole new life that has been more wonderful than anything I could ever have imagined. The light led me into ministry in San Antonio and to Carlos, who has been an additional source of light and laughter and love in my life.

Advent reminds us once again that God's Light is always ready to pierce the darkness of our lives and shine Christ's Light on us in all kinds of surprising and wonderful ways. Thanks be to God!

Sally Stockley Johnson 2009

WEEK FOUR

LOVE

With the use of images of light in this final week of readings on Love, we circle back around to where we started this Advent season, with light as symbol of Hope. The light of God's love takes us back to hope, as love always does.

Westover has been thinking lately of connections, awakened as our faith community is with Love-driven curiosity about the world and its needs: How are we related to one another? Programs we have had this fall have focused on these connections: some have been engaged in exploring improvements in dialog regarding race. Others have looked at the relevance of sermons from past decades to guide us in coping with the upheavals of our present society. Others still have reached out in conversation and teaching in prison rooms. And we have looked for opportunities to engage with our Muslim neighbors.

These connections open our minds to further relationships: What does a program to address literacy among women in prison have in common with out-of-work coal workers in West Virginia or our disaster relief efforts have in common with Black Lives Matter? What do the families we serve in Family Promise have in common with immigrants or with the water-starved communities in Flint, Michigan? What does the LGBTQ community have in common with the Muslim community with whom we share meals?

We are pulled, as the expression goes, into "a fellowship of differences." We acknowledge this as we recite together in worship words from the 1986 Confession of Belhar: "The communion of saints called from the entire human family." Efforts at ministry, fragile though they may seem to us, do their quiet work of reconciliation and healing. We place our hope in the acts of ordinary people to lay aside the forces of darkness and let the light of God's love shine through.

Sunday, December 18

Isaiah 2:1-5, Psalm 122, Romans 13:11-14, Matthew 24:36-44

TIME TO AWAKEN

Like many Americans, even though I know there is a difference between Advent and Christmas, there are many temptations to blur that difference. Although I know there are Christmas ads and Christmas sales already, before thanksgiving, I've had better things to do than go to the shopping centers and malls. But it won't be long, and I'll come back humming Christmas carols, at least if they play any that I recognize.

I don't expect to hear Christmas texts read today or the Pastor to tell Christmas stories. But I do expect to be reminded that God is calling us into a new future that God is bringing into being. I hope to be instructed in God's ways for this new future, how to beat swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, and how to quit making war against one another.

I hope to be invited and exhorted to pray for the peace of Jerusalem, and for the peace of Little Rock, and New York, Kabul, Kandahar, and Jalalabad. I hope to be urged to pray for the peace of all those cities and more, and all my fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters in them.

This Sunday in Advent, remind us that the night is far gone, that it's time to lay aside the words of darkness and walk in the ways of the Lord Jesus.

We do not know about the day or hour of his coming. There is an inertia in human and worldly affairs that leads us to assume things will go on and on in the same way as long people go on. But in our heart of hearts we know that changes are needed. We need to seek God's ways, not those of the world. We need to seek to love God and others, especially those who seem unlovely to us. We need to awaken to God, and where God is leading us today.

“Sleepers, wake!” A voice astounds us;
The shout of rampart guards surrounds us:
“Awake, Jerusalem, arise!”
Midnight's peace their cry has broken,
Their urgent summons clearly spoken:

“The time has come, O maidens wise!
Rise up, and give us light;
The Bridegroom is in sight.
Alleluia! Your lamps prepare and hasten there,
That you the wedding feast may share.”

Bill McWeeny 2010

Monday, December 19

Wonder by R.J. Palacio is the fictional story of 10 year old August Pullman who was born with a severe facial deformity that has kept him, by choice, at home for schooling-----until now, the 5th grade. Mom, then Dad, and finally, Auggie, decide it is time to experience the wider world of a public school education.

Auggie is an ordinary kid...with an “extraordinary smile”. How will others react to him? Will they look beyond the bangs of hair hiding his face; a face that is beloved by his family; but, what about the others? Will they be understanding? Will they be sensitive? Will they be kind? Who will be his friends? Anybody? Mom says, “You won’t be the only new kid.” Auggie replies, “I’ll be the only kid that looks like me.” (Palacio p. 12)

There are good days and difficult days in the 5th grade for August Pullman, but in the midst of those days, Auggie’s presence teaches others about kindness. So much so that his middle school Principal, Mr. Tushman, has some final words about the subject of “kindness” as he addresses the 5th graders at the end of the school year.

Mr. Tushman’s quiet words flow out to the assembled students and families. He says, “Shall we make a new rule of life...always to try to be a little kinder than is necessary? Because it is in these moments of kindness that we recognize the face of God: it glimmers in kindness to others; it glows in its keenness; it hints at true caring; it caresses in a gaze of understanding. If every single person made it a rule that wherever you are, whenever you can, you will try to act a little kinder than is necessary--then, each morning would be a better time and the world would be a better place. And if you can do this, someone else, somewhere, someday may recognize in you, the face of God.” (Palacio, p. 299-301)

Through Mr. Tushman’s quiet words comes the awakening to a new morn for the students and for those of us who will read Wonder: how refreshing that morn will be for all when we show a little more kindness than necessary in all the morns of our lives.

Nancy Passini 2013

Tuesday, December 20

“At Home in Sacred Places, a theme which calls to mind both the starting point of our spiritual journey and its end.”

Just like you, I was born a child of God. I know deep in my heart that the starting point of my spiritual journey began on the day of my birth, February 4, 1958, in Balikpapan, Indonesia. My parents named me Paulette Wilma Georgine, the first letter of each name after Billy Graham's book, *Peace with God*.

Just days after my birth, a civil war erupted on the island. Born to a Dutch-Indonesian father and an Indonesian mother, I was the youngest of six children. Both of my parents were born and raised in Indonesia. Both of my parents were Christians living in a Muslim country.

My father was a successful businessman and owned a construction company. My parents contributed greatly to the community and were faithful members of the protestant church. They built churches and gave them as gifts to the congregations. They were generous to those less fortunate. They threw lavish parties and entertained guests frequently. According to my older siblings, life in Indonesia was enchanting. A tropical paradise.

Life was good until the political unrest came. During the 1950's, tension between the Dutch people and the Indonesians escalated to rebellion and all over Indonesia, Dutch properties and assets were being seized, including all the properties my parents built and owned. The anti-Dutch views were strong and my family, who had claimed Dutch citizenship, was forced to leave the land they loved. Soon after I was born, we secured passage on a cargo ship and we made the ocean journey to Holland, where many of the other Dutch Indonesians fled. We were considered refugees.

Five decades and three continents later, my spiritual journey continues. Sometimes I'm fully immersed in it. Other times I question it and run away from it. Many times I allow my personal life and career to steer me away from it. However, deep in my heart, 57 years later, I know I was born a child of God. Because of this, I continue to find refuge in God's presence and love.

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My faith from knowing I was born a child of God is instilled deep within me. It came from the teachings of my parents who raised me in a loving, caring, and Christian home. It came from my sweet siblings who always hovered over me and cared for me. Knowing that I am a child of God makes me feel at home. I'm at home and in a sacred place. Yet my spiritual journey continues.

My prayer: Dear Father, you are my refuge and my strength. Continue to be in my heart. Open my mind, my eyes, and my ears to your presence while I'm on this spiritual journey on earth. Give me compassion for today's refugees who are presently fleeing the countries they love, and may they too feel your presence. Amen,

Paulette Nieuwenhof 2015
Peace with God

Wednesday, December 21

HOW WILL I KNOW THAT IT'S EMMANUEL AND NOT AN IMPOSTOR?

Luke 4:16-20

When I look for signs of God with us, “Emmanuel,” I sometimes wonder if I’m fooling myself. I wonder if the person who does a good deed or shows grace is really a God-bringer or just an impostor. How can I tell?

In Luke 4:16-20, Luke tells of Jesus’ sermon at First Synagogue Nazareth, where Jesus quotes Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor....to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind....” By the time Jesus, who had announced that he was the Anointed One, had finished preaching, the congregation was so incensed that they “drove him out of the town” and intended to throw him over a cliff.

I have concluded that my God-sightings are authentic if they relate to people’s bringing good news, proclaiming release, and helping people recover their sight. I can consider it an act of grace and of “God with us” if the action relates to the ministry of healing, physical, spiritual, or social, that Isaiah and Jesus describe.

The grandmother of a Lyon College student opened the doors of her small Presbyterian church to the neighborhood in order to give art and music lessons to children who probably couldn’t afford private lessons. Since many of those children were from a minority group, she risked community censure.

Perhaps less risky, but infinitely meaningful, Ferncliff staff and counselors for years have operated healing camps: for survivors of school shootings, for children impacted by suicide in their family, for survivors of tornados and other natural disasters, for siblings separated in the foster care system.

There’s more to the story. At first, the Good News of Emmanuel may be well accepted. But then, people may “get their backs up.” I am especially convinced that God is with us when I hear of the God-bringer taking

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great personal risk. Harking back to the Luke passage, the congregation at Nazareth initially claimed Jesus as their own hometown son; then they turned on him and forced him to take his leave.

A young doctor/professor friend from New Orleans recently responded to a call from the World Health Organization to help retrofit a hospital in Sierra Leone so the staff could treat Ebola patients. At great risk to himself and under excruciating conditions, he has helped caregivers in Freetown organize to care for local citizens.

To me, all these people show the face of God to those who've been oppressed, traumatized, or left out. They exhibit "the real thing", Emmanuel, God with us.

Prayer: Thank you, God, for revealing yourself through the gracious acts of ordinary people. May we also make ourselves available to show the face of God authentically to others around us, regardless of the risk to ourselves. Forgive us when we miss such opportunities. Amen

Liz Branch 2014

Thursday, December 22

In both the Old and New Testaments, there are many references to “light.” Most religions and cultures use light to symbolize God or godliness. From Genesis 1:3 where God says “Let there be light, and there was light,” Revelation 22:5 where we read “...for the Lord God will be their light...”, we find the word “light” used many times.

For us as Christians, light as it is used in the New Testament centers around Jesus and the belief that Christ is the light of the world. God’s love through Christ shines in many ways and sometimes really DOES take us by surprise.

I am always so humbled when the light and love of God through Christ comes to me, often when I least expect it and yet, need it the most. It may come in the form of a hug from my granddaughters and the words “I love you “ from their little mouths. It certainly came to me in the sunrise I watched as it appeared over the ocean on a recent trip to Florida. Often, this light comes to me in the words of a hymn or a passage of scripture. The love of family, friends, and my extended church family are all reminders of God’s love for me.

As Christians, we are called on to reflect the light of God’s love each day, not just those days during Advent and Christmas. Sometimes that reflection might take the form of a smile to a stranger; a hug for a family member; a phone call or note to someone who is sick; helping serve a meal to the homeless in the community; or a visit to a nursing home or hospital. We might be the only reflection of the light of God’s love that some people ever experience. What an awesome responsibility, but also what an awesome privilege!

My prayer is that we may all experience God’s love in Christ as it comes to us and shines in our lives-surprising and amazing us in large and small ways, not just during Advent and Christmas, but during all our days.

Ann Weems, in her poem “Toward the Light”, reminds us of the importance of moving in the direction of the light.

TOWARD THE LIGHT

Too often our answer to the darkness
is not running toward Bethlehem
but running away.

We ought to know by now that we can't see
where we're going in the dark.

Running away is rampant...

separation is stylish:

separation from mates, from friends, from self.

Run and tranquilize,

don't talk about it,

avoid.

Run away and join the army

of those who have already run away.

When are we going to learn that Christmas Peace
comes only when we turn and face the darkness?

Only then will we be able to see
the Light of the World.

Ann Weems

Kneeling in Bethlehem

Betty Glenn 2009

Friday, December 23

Scripture taken from John 3: 21

“Those who do what is true come to the light so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

When we speak of Light we can mean more than one thing. In this passage “Light” refers to living in God’s light as Jesus lived and taught us, and through Grace that God freely gives us.

Living into this light can happen by expanding our faith, accepting and believing that God will be with us always in times of joy and also in times of sadness. Living into the light means living in God’s love. When I think about my life I realize I have not always accepted God’s love whether it came from family and friends or from the acceptance that I am a child of God and therefore loved unconditionally by God. I have not always opened up space for God’s love to light up my life. When I think about this I am reminded of a principle of water color painting.

I don’t claim to be “an artist, but I have taken a couple of water coloring classes. One basic principle of watercolor painting is wherever you want light in a painting, you must keep that space free of color. The white of the paper is the light and it defines the colored shapes around it. The painter sketches a scene and determines which areas to leave untouched or lightly washed with color. As deeper color is added shapes and details become clear and the painting is created by the contrast of light and shades of color.

Perhaps our lives are a series of paintings; some dark with color, others more defined with the contrast of light and color. In this Advent season, we anticipate new beginnings. Although we may be unclear about the events or opportunities which may come our way, we pray for our increased awareness of God’s presence and direction for our individual lives and the life of Westover Hills.

Prayer:

Creator God of All that Is and Is to Come,

We stand in awe of your gift of Jesus Christ to the world and all humanity. We are still wary of the complete love you have for each one of us. Strengthen our attempts to leave open space in our lives for the light of your love to more clearly define the shapes and details of our lives.

Amen

Eileen Joyce 2013

Saturday, December 24

Isaiah 9:2-7 · Luke 2:1-14

Christian writers as diverse as Dutch-born Catholic priest Henri Nouwen and German theologian Paul Tillich find common ground in the observation that the mystery of the Incarnation, the mystery we celebrate on Christmas Eve, is at the heart of the Christian faith. And that mystery is about the All-powerful choosing to self-reveal through the divesting of power.

Nouwen expresses his sense of this Incarnation mystery with his captivating directness and simplicity:

God chose powerlessness. God chose to enter into human history in complete weakness. That divine choice forms the center of the Christian faith. In Jesus of Nazareth, the powerless God appeared among us to unmask the illusion of power, to disarm the prince of darkness who rules the world, and to bring the divided human race to a new unity. (From *Finding My Way Home*)

Tillich, in a sermon reflecting on the Song of Simeon (Luke 2:25-32), seems to draw upon the experience of his conflict with Nazi authorities in the 1930's:

Salvation has the nature of a child. ... Salvation is a child and when it grows up it is crucified. Only he who can see power under weakness, the whole under the fragment, victory under defeat, glory under suffering, innocence under guilt, sanctity under sin, life under death can say: Mine eyes have seen thy salvation. (From *The New Being*)

It's still the challenge at the heart of the gospel – seeing power under weakness; seeing the illusion of power unmasked and letting those insights draw us into God's new unity. It's not logical, and left-brain thinkers like me have a hard time dealing with it.

But on occasions like Christmas Eve worship, somewhere in the singing, the reading of Luke's account of startled shepherds tending their flocks,

the sharing of bread, cup, and candle flames in a darkened sanctuary,
somehow I get it.

My prayer is that one way or another, these meditations, along with our
Advent season worship and events, have helped you get it too.

Rev. Frank LeBlanc 2013

Sunday, December 25

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."
Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices,
together they sing for joy;
for in plain sight they see
the return of the LORD to Zion.
Break forth together into singing,
you ruins of Jerusalem;
for the LORD has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.
The LORD has bared his holy arm
before the eyes of all the nations;
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God.

Isaiah 52:7-10

The Word became
a human being
and lived here with us.
We saw his true glory,
the glory of the only Son
of the Father.
From him all the kindness
and all the truth of God
have come down to us.

John 1:14

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