



*Good News of
Great Joy*

The Gospel of Luke 2:1-14

JOY
TO THE
WORLD
— THE —
LORD
IS *come*

A Devotional Book by Epiphany Lutheran Church— 2017



December 2

“Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” Mark 10:15

I have always loved the Christmas season, but I'll be honest...some years I get carried away in the “busy-ness” of the season and feel pressured to “get things done” rather than relax and enjoy it all. I haven't always taken the time to FOCUS on what and why we are celebrating. But the past two years have allowed me to experience Christmas in a whole new, joyful, incredible way...through the eyes of a child, my two year old son, Breck. Experiencing Christmas with him and considering how he sees the world has forced me to slow down and consider more deeply what we are celebrating: God's gift to us, His son, whom He sent to show us just how much He loves us.

Experiencing Christmas with Breck has also blessed me with the gift of sharing the unbridled JOY that he has for all of our traditions. Visiting family, decorating the Christmas tree, hanging lights and decorations in our home, making cookies, singing Christmas songs, buying gifts for family and friends, bundling up in the snow and looking at our neighbors' decorated homes...all of these take on deeper meaning when seen through his eyes. He just wants to be with the people he loves and



to admire the beauty that surrounds him. Why hadn't I recognized that at the heart of all of these traditions is a desire to share God's love with others and to appreciate the beauty of God's creation? I am profoundly grateful that my son's perspective reminds me of this fact.

Breck may not yet understand that Jesus lies at the center of everything we do this time of year. But I truly believe that he knows there is something special about Christmas. As he grows I will help him understand that there is even more than he knows to be joyful about, just as he will continue to help me slow down and REALLY experience that joy.

Dear Heavenly Father,
This Christmas season, allow us to experience the joy that comes from seeing the world through the eyes of a child.

Amen



December 3

I just received a very thoughtful packet from Spence Funeral Home that included a book about renewing your Spirit...a guide for holidays and special days. It begins with a quote: Find ways that you can remember with JOY...ways you shared with your loved one.

Of course there is great JOY...I know I am not the only one who is experiencing Advent and the waiting for baby Jesus in a new way...but there is always JOY at this time of year and yes....even after the loss of a loved one. I choose to celebrate and count the many, many ways that my loved one, Mike, enjoyed the Christmas season. The number one joy I will always associate with preparing for Christmas is the JOY and EXCITEMENT and FULFILLMENT Mike always got from preparing and performing music for worship and Christmas Eve services. It was that time when he could call upon current and former students to share their music gifts, or team up with his "brother" John Long and make beautiful music together. Giving back and helping prepare music was his great joy because he truly lived his life by his favorite saying...The greatest gift you can give someone is your time.

I know without a doubt that his gift of music was always most JOYFUL when he was making music with his children. Christmas time was a special time at our house of gathering around the piano to practice with Dad...or



having him run everyone to church to run through pieces with Terry. Sometimes he asked...sometimes he volunteered....and many times they rolled their eyes and said, "Dad, did you promise the 'Von-Sewells' would perform?!"

I remember with such JOY last Christmas Eve when we had convinced Mike to just attend and enjoy church without performing since he had given so much of his health and time to Central's musical AND everyone was arriving at all crazy times...including Miss Lea literally stepping off a bus from a 20+ hour ride home from her bowl game with the Marching 110. I know at the time Mike was a little upset that they weren't participating....but I offer this JOY of a memory...He sat with both girls by his side and they harmonized and thoroughly enjoyed Pastor Tim's sermon and the hymns and of course...trying not to spill candle wax on each other during Silent Night.

He has the perfect seat to enjoy all the holiday music this season and I know he would want all of us to anticipate the coming of Christ with great JOY and a little bit of music! Find ways to remember with JOY and celebrate!



December 4

Hallelujah!

“Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: ‘Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns.’

—Revelation 19:6

When I was a student at Luther College, we had an annual Advent tradition of singing George Frideric Händel’s oratorio, (The) Messiah. This was an enormous event. Any Luther student could participate in the chorus whether he or she was in a regular choir or not. Hundreds of people participated in the chorus, and returning alumni added to the ranks. At that time, the concert was held in the Field House to accommodate the large number of performers and the sellout audience. The chorus was so large, in fact, that we filled an entire wall of bleachers from nearly floor to ceiling. We sat while the soloists sang, so when we stood up as a group to sing the choruses, the bleachers swayed back and forth so much from the sudden movement of so many people standing up all at once that we all had to hold onto each other for dear life! But that was all part of the excitement of it.

One of the big highlights of the oratorio for me was singing the well-known chorus, “Hallelujah!” (also known as The Hallelujah Chorus):

has sent me to bring
tidings to the poor.
Isaiah 60:1

Hallelujah! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth. The kingdom of this world is become the Kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; And He shall reign for ever and ever.

King of Kings, and Lord of Lords. Hallelujah!

From the first *Hallelujah!* to the final one, being a part of a chorus with the parts bouncing off each other, singing those stirring words set to the powerful music, standing shoulder to shoulder alongside hundreds of other voices unified in praise to God seemed to transport everyone to a heavenly realm of indescribable joy! By the time we reached the final lines of the chorus — *King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Hallelujah!* — it was (and still is) hard to sing without tears streaming down my face. It's like getting a glimpse of heaven.

I often wonder how awesome it must have been on that first Christmas night to be a part of the multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and singing, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men." I can't imagine how beautiful that heavenly music must have sounded. I don't think I would have been able to sing along without being reduced to tears of joy. But as long as I'm still on this side of heaven, I'll sing "Hallelujah!" at every opportunity with utter bliss.



December 5

Christmas. Laughter, hugs, gifts, music, moments of peace, family—especially grandchildren, gratitude, God’s love for us made manifest in a baby, hope, promises fulfilled, miracles, anticipation.

Joy. Defined as a feeling of great pleasure and happiness, delight, jubilation, rejoicing, exhilaration, exuberance. Such a small word, joy. Three letters shouldn’t be enough to describe such a HUGE feeling, an emotion that fills you up until it explodes into laughter, dancing, celebration—something physical is needed to illustrate and give life to that feeling. JOY!!

God’s love for us so filled him with JOY that he shared his Son, Jesus, with us. Love and JOY becoming a gift for us in the form of a Savior to gift us with hope and faith and JOY!

So, what part of the Christmas season brings me the most JOY? It’s in the silent moments when the feeling of anticipation is allowed to bloom—sitting in the dark with my husband and gazing at our beautiful, lighted Christmas tree; sitting back and quietly watching the grandchildren tear into the gifts we purchased so carefully and lovingly for each child; and the final moment is sitting in church at the candlelight service, singing “Silent Night, Holy Night” as the church darkens and is filled with the quiet anticipation of the Savior’s birth. The second verse of that simple hymn tells of the expression of JOY at that moment: “...Glories stream from heaven afar, Heavenly Hosts sing, Alleluia, Christ the Saviour is born!” Love that couldn’t be contained and exploded into an expression of JOY.

Written by: Cindy Ganem



December 6

Joy. What does it really mean? Merriam-Webster defines it as “the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires.” Wikipedia explains it as “a feeling of great pleasure or happiness.” To my husband Marv and me, it means our “California crew” – son, daughter-in-law, granddaughter, grandson – coming to visit.

Joy. How does it really feel? Giving and receiving a son’s hugs. Sharing confidences with a “daughter”. Baking cookies with a 4-year-old and enjoying how this daughter of engineers simply must have red and green and rainbow sprinkles on every cookie. Delighting in the smiles and babble of a 9-month-old who’s finally decided you’re not so scary after all. Never knowing exactly what’s going to happen at mealtimes. And knowing these wonderful beings love you for simply who you are and no other reason.

Joy. Isn’t this the gift of Jesus that God gives to us? The angel announced his birth to the shepherds by proclaiming, “Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy to all the people...” (Luke 2:10). The Magi who followed a star to find Jesus and worship him felt the same: “When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy” (Matt. 2:10). And the result? Jesus, the most wonderful being of all, loves us for simply who we are and no other reason.

Lord, we praise you and thank you for the gift of your son Jesus. Watch over our families and all who are in our hearts. And remind us that there is joy in each day if we focus on Christ’s unconditional love for us. Amen

Written by: Ann Stephanson



FOR A CHILD

December 7

“And tidings of comfort and JOY”

Christmas is a joyful season with music, gift giving, family time, and many chances to help others. During this wonderful time, the Christmas lights brighten up the December nights. I find comfort and joy in the many different Christmas lights. I love the special holiday displays put up around town and the decorations on individual houses. I have already been to the zoo to marvel at the colors, to be amazed by the technology as the music synchronizes with the flashing displays, and to watch the joy on the faces of all ages. To this day, I still get excited when my tree is up and my house is filled with candles in the windows and lights shining on the tree.

But there is also a joyful comfort that comes with the Christmas lights. Each Sunday we light an Advent candle; first for hope, then peace, next JOY and finally love. What great promises these are from God to remember and carry with us through the Christmas season. Then on Christmas Eve, I love to watch the candlelight spread among the congregation as we celebrate the birth of Jesus come to be the light for our world. John 8:12 says, “I am the Light of the World, he who follows Me will not walk in darkness, but will have the Light of life.”

As the Christmas lights brighten the longest nights of the year, let us enjoy them and remember that Jesus is our light as we go through good and dark times in our lives. Find JOY in this bright promise!

Written by: Sandy McLoney

[S BORN TO US

December 8



I was diagnosed in 2008 with breast cancer and I am still here in 2017 to celebrate the birth of Jesus and the joy. My family is large so Christmas time is when most of us can get together, which gives me joy also.

“But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see I am bringing good news of great joy for all the people.’” Luke 2:10

Joy to the world

The Joy
of CHRISTMAS

Written by: Kelly Porter





December 9

A “Peaceful Joy” on Christmas Eve

I grew up in a Christian home. We never missed Christmas Eve services. Larry and I continued this tradition after we were married. The music, the story from Luke, the choirs, the message, all of it was joy filled and wonderful.

December 24th, 2007 was a different year. We planned to continue our worship tradition...when something pulled us away. My Mom was at Lutheran Village in Columbus, and our family decided to break tradition and spend Christmas Eve sitting by the bedside of my Mom, Alice. She was barely aware of us being there. She could barely say a word. She may not have recognized us. A local group came down the hallway singing Christmas carols. Men, women and children (we didn't know any of them) sang familiar songs. Suddenly my Mom began singing. Her voice was soft, but she knew every word. We joined her sweet sound. It was beautiful and yes, “joyful”. We realized that there are many ways to worship the Christ Child on Christmas Eve.

Two days later Alice died. She joined the “Angels we have heard on High” sweetly singing.

Have a “joyful” Christmas.

Written by: Joyce Gornall



December 10

It was a modest little house, set back in the woods off a two lane gravel road, but that little house held enough love to cover 7 families & 22 grandchildren. My grandparents lived there & every Christmas we all piled in to enjoy plentiful food, good fellowship, & listen to Grandpa read the Christmas story. My grandparents loved God & family & always made us feel as if we were special! I have many photos where we are packed to the walls; adults, children, infants, in front of a huge table of food. All are smiling & joyful as my grandparents look on with pride.

If there was snow we got to go outside to play or sled or throw snowballs. I still remember how we laughed with joy when Grandpa would come out for a snowball fight. Then cold & wet, we would plod back into the warm house, hungry again for cake or pie or leftovers. When we left at the end of the day, we always got a hug & “I love you” from Grandma & Grandpa.

My grandparents have been gone for many years now, as have quite a few family members in those photos. Yet when those of us still here get together, we talk of those joyous days of our childhood & the unconditional love we received from our grandparents. Precious memories, joyous memories, to sustain us throughout the highs & lows of life. Make some memories of your own. Open your heart to joy this holiday season.

Written by: Linda Fosnaugh



December 11

JOY TO THE WORLD

“JOY”

The word JOY brings back memories of a Sunday school lesson from many years ago.

“J” is for Jesus. Jesus came into the world with lessons of God’s love, forgiveness and promises for all people. His life on earth was an example of that love and acceptance.

“O” is for others. Jesus offers his message without exception. He does not exclude others based on wealth, lifestyle, or ethnicity.

“Y” is for yourself.

It is easy to get caught in the commercialized Christmas. My list includes decorating, shopping, cards, cooking, socializing and those unexpected requests.

Jesus came for me. I am a loved and forgiven child of God. “JOY” reminds me of God’s love for me and others.

Good News of Great Joy

A favorite hymn of mine includes the following:

If I have wounded any soul today

If I have caused one foot to go astray

If I have walked in my own willful way

Dear Lord, forgive

Forgive the sins I have confessed to Thee

Forgive the secret sins I do not see

O guide me, love me and my keeper be

Dear Lord, Amen

Joy to the world and to each and every one of us.



December 12



Spreading God's light is what gives me the most joy during the Christmas season. 2 Corinthians verses 8-12 says, "For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have." This verse reminds me that it is not the price, size, or flashiness of a gift; it is the meaning of the gift. To give is to spread God's light, and that is what the Christmas season is about.

Every year, the Bellaire Christmas party is held. This brings me joy: children who do not have much, spread so much cheer. These children know that the presents they receive at this event will most likely be the only gifts they receive for the season. However, it is not the gifts that brings them happiness, it is spending time with their families and the youth and families of Epiphany. The community opens their arms to us and makes us feel like family. 1 John, chapter 4 verse 12 says, "No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us." The Bellaire community is living out this verse. It is not about the gifts,





it is about God's love and our hands.

Just as Linus told Charlie Brown, "I never thought it was such a bad little tree; it's not bad at all, really. Maybe it just needs a little love." Giving a little love, which spreads God's light, is what brings me joy during Christmas time: catching up with old friends, helping make cookies, holding the door for someone. Even the apostle Paul knew it was better to give than to receive. We give the gift of the gospel every time we spread God's light through love and kindness. As we give the gift of God's love, we are reminded that Jesus, God's gift to us, will come again.

May you be filled with joy this Christmas season as you give God's light as He gave to us.

*"How silently, how silently
The wondrous gift is giv'n!
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of his heav'n."*



December 13

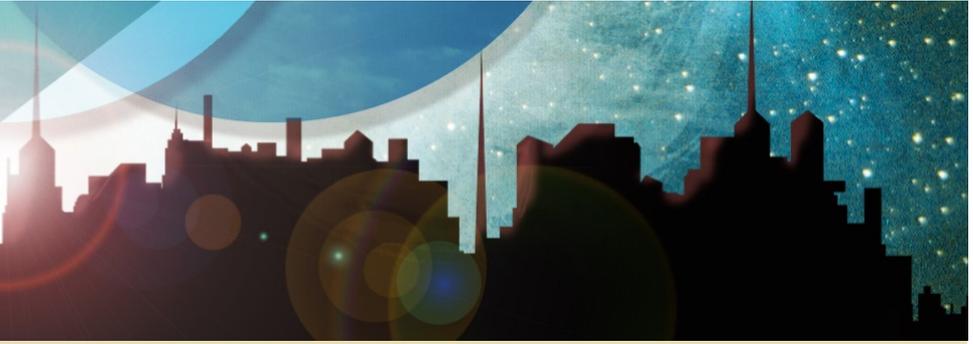
Go, Tell It On The Mountain
... One person at a time

It's one of my favorite hymns for Christmas! It's got a great message of hope with angels singing, heavenly light and a celebration of the birth of Jesus!

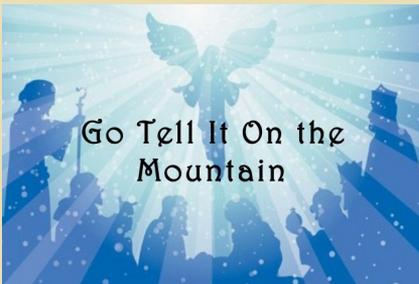
*Go, Tell It On The Mountain,
 Over the hills and everywhere;
 Go, Tell It On The Mountain
 That Jesus Christ is born.*

It also asks us to do something ... Go and tell!

It seems simple enough. OK, we don't have any nearby mountains, but we do have some hills and everywhere covers you know, everywhere. But how are we supposed to tell everyone?



It may be easier to express your faith at Church, but it gets harder when you walk outside the Epiphany doors. There are many people we know in our neighborhood, at school or work, friends and family members who know and love Jesus. Maybe the hymn wants us to bring encouragement and joy to other believers. Maybe the hymn wants us to share the good news of Jesus to everyone we meet. Maybe it means that we can share our joy with one person at a time by doing simple things like helping someone in need, showing that you care, being a friend and showing God's love in how you live your life. Go and tell.





December 14

The Joy of the Lord is your strength. Nehemiah 8:10

What brings me the most joy at Christmas time? My favorite part of Christmas is Christmas music: special Christmas music by the choir, Christmas carols, and Christmas hymns. I love listening to classical Christmas songs, contemporary Christmas songs and Christmas Carols! I love singing contemporary Christmas songs as well as traditional Christmas songs. Christmas music seems special because we only hear them for a couple of months.

Christmas carols are also special because they highlight Jesus' birth. Songs such as "Away in a Manger", "Joy to the World", and "O Come All Ye Faithful" are traditionally sung at Christmas time. "What Child is This?" is one of my favorites. Without traditional Christmas carols and hymns, the Christmas joy meter would register very low.

Can you imagine Christmas without singing "Silent Night"?



I think another reason I love Christmas carols so much is they remind me of family together at Christmas. We sing Christmas carols at the Christmas Eve service. We sing Christmas carols in the car while driving to visit grandparents and other relatives.

In our church, there is special music every Sunday through December: vocal solos as well as instrumental solos. We sing special Christmas songs as part of our December worship services. We sing Christmas carols to residents at nursing homes as well as to shut-ins. Singing Christmas carols raises the “feel good meter” to the max! You can’t sing a Christmas carol without sporting a smile or perhaps shedding a tear over a precious memory!

So this Christmas sing a Christmas carol or two and spread Christmas joy!





December 15

What in the Christmas season brings me the most joy? It is hearing voices of all ages singing the news of the coming of Christ. I have been blessed to hear the singing of so many; young and old bringing me great joy during my life time as a choir member and choir director.

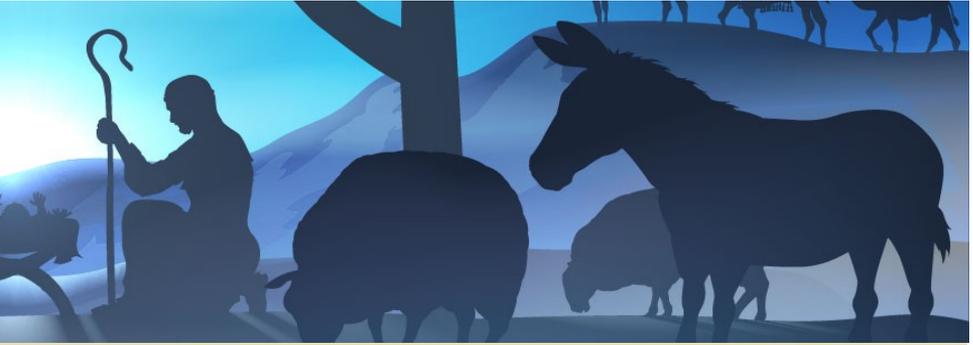
I have often experienced and am still experiencing joy in guiding voices of young people with mental or physical issues, junior and senior high school students, church choirs and many others. All of these singers/singing groups remind me that we share great joy through music regardless of anything else that defines us.

When the choirs are dressed well before a performance, that tells me they are giving their best to others who came to listen. When I hear the simplest words of songs, those simple words fill my heart and carry the glad message of hope in the coming of Christ.

Music is a wonderful vehicle to bring joy to others. It is not only the words and music but also the happy faces of the singers that touch my soul. When singers send their meaningful words to me, they themselves become beautiful songs.

James 5:13 "Is anyone of you in trouble? They should pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise."

Written by: Carol Huffman



December 16



“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

Luke 6:31

The joy that I feel when helping my family and friends is more of a way of life for me. The saying “it is better to give than to receive” is so true.

The joy of helping my friends here at church; being back-up for my mom; making sure my daughter sees and feels the love I have for her-these are just a few of the ways joy comes into my life.

Every year, the week before Christmas, all the sisters and daughters on Mom’s side of the family get together for food, presents and crafts– we should do it more often!

The joy that I feel during the holidays is really no different than the rest of the year!



Written by: Teresa Weber





December 17



“Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music.” Psalm 98:4

There are so many pieces and parts during the Christmas season that bring me joy, it's difficult to choose the one that brings me the most joy. However, the first thing that comes to my mind is music. Music is such an important part of my faith. Through both ringing in the bell choir and singing in the choir, I get a front row seat in celebrating the Christmas season with music. Starting with wonderful Advent hymns to the Christmas Cantata to my favorite Christmas hymns sung by candlelight on Christmas Eve, music is the embodiment of this season. My daughter, Adrienne, loves Christmas music! I imagine she would listen to it all year if she could.

I believe the Christmas hymns we sing each season lead us through the story of Jesus's birth. If we truly listen to the words of each of our favorite hymns, we can visualize the journey Mary and Joseph took, the gifts received from the wise men, the angels, and how even the animals waited with





anticipation of the birth of Jesus. Finally, we sing “Joy to the World, the Lord has come!” Every part of the Christmas season, and the joy we feel during this season, can be shared with music!

The next time I listen to my favorite Christmas song or hymn, I want to think about what part of this season, what part of the story does this song represent? That is what brings me the most joy during this season!

Lord, as we enter the Christmas season, we want to take time to thank You for sending Your Son to be born as a baby and to become our Savior... so that He can bring peace into the hearts of those who believe and joy to those who find their hope in You.

Lord, we know that only in You is there true peace and lasting joy to be found, and as we sing the Christmas carols and choruses this Christmas season.. we pray that true joy would come into the world this season and that many would find their peace. This we ask in Jesus’s name,

Amen

Written by: Erica Klenotic



December 18

As I sat trying to put together an expression of joy over Christmas, I felt puzzled that I wasn't brimming with glad tidings.

As a child, I felt the joy that overwhelmed me; presents, food, presents, decorations, presents, no school, presents...you know what I mean.

A little older, it became about what do get for family and friends? At whose house do we gather for dinner, etc.

Adult years meant time away in the military and time spent concerned over the health of my mother.

Then I met, fell in love with, and married Brenna. She directed me back to church and the joy of the season. Steve was born and I got to witness a child's innocent joy. He grew into an excellent young man who cares for others, desires to do God's service, and is so much more than I am or ever thought I would be.

Yet sometimes I wish for that promised Christmas joy. I see a scary world...nuclear threats, terrorists and



even church shootings. Still, people take care of each other, care for each other, forgive each other and love each other. That is the joy found in Christmas. The hope we have in Jesus's birth, death and resurrection. The joy of His love that we continue to teach and share.

My joy is sharing that love, trying to be the example for my family , my church family and our church kids.

“For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? Yes, you are our glory and joy!” 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20

JOY
to the world



GOOD NEWS IS GREAT

December 19



Finding Joy

Romans 5:1-5 Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Peace, hope, and love, our themes the past 3 years of Advent devotionals. With this year's Advent theme being joy, one wonders, how do you find joy during the holiday season? How does joy become a part of our everyday life?

Finding happiness and joy seem almost impossible in the crazy world we live. Drugs, crime, hunger, injustice, terrorists, to name a few, splatter the daily front page of the Columbus Dispatch. In our personal lives we deal with family problems, job issues, health concerns, or money. Daily living is challenging and overwhelming.



NEWS OF TJJOY

When life events are ready to put me over the edge, I lean on my faith in God to help me through. Faith gives me peace and hope for a better tomorrow, knowing I am in God's hands. I try my best to "Let go, and let God", because situations are often out of my control. The serenity prayer is a favorite in hard times:

*God grant me the serenity to
Accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,
And wisdom to know the difference.*

Growing up in our youth group, it was taught that to find joy, you put your priorities and focus in the following order:

J = Jesus

O = Others

Y = You

Jesus is God's gift of love to the world. Following Jesus and putting others before you is a recipe for a joyful and fulfilled spirit.

Continued on the next page



So, what brings me joy during this holiday season? What brings me joy every day? Peace, hope, and love I find through Christ Jesus bring me joy.

1 Peter 1:8-9 *“You love him, although you have not seen him, and you believe in him, although you do not now see him. So you rejoice with a great and glorious joy, which words cannot express, because you are receiving the salvation of your souls, which is the purpose of your faith in him.”*

Dear Heavenly Father,

Our hearts are filled with joy at the birth of your son, Jesus. Thank you for sending Him into the world, bringing us peace, hope, and love. Please help us to always put You first in our lives, and to take the time to help those in need.

Amen



December 20



I find the joy of Christmas to be found in many places. First would be the joy of the gift of Christ to mankind as described in Luke 2:8-14. For me, I think of Peanuts' Linus Van Pelt in the TV classic, "A Charlie Brown Christmas".

"And the angel said unto them, 'Fear not: for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.' "

It is a time to celebrate all that Christ brought upon his arrival to earth. The miracle of the virgin birth. The Holy Trinity. Forgiveness, love and salvation. It is such a joy to celebrate this blessed event through expressions of love, charity, song, and fellowship with others.

There is joy in the knowledge that Christ is with us always. The Christmas season provides reminders of this knowledge and the opportunity to share this good news with others. I am reminded of a Christmas Eve sermon years ago that defined the word Joy as "Jesus, Only You". To this day, I cannot hear the word Joy without thinking "Jesus, Only You".

Written by: Tim Bower





December 21



I LOVE all the joys that Christmas brings! I love shopping, the smell of a fresh Christmas tree, the Hallmark channel of Christmas movies with happy ever after endings, the music, the decorating inside and out, the pretty Christmas lights, shopping for the Bellaire kids and donating for a new coat, cookies, too much candy, hot spiced cider, prime rib and ham and spoiling my kids and grandkids! I love the joy of an unexpected gift from a special person and I love being a person who gives that unexpected gift. I love the God given joy to cherish another Christmas with my 91 year old mother and a special aunt and uncle. The joy of all five of our senses are real and experienced during the holidays.

Plus, God gave us this earth to enjoy. The variety of birds that flock to my feeders bring such joy. The unexpected bluebirds, one winter, were an amazing gift to me. Then there was the time a couple of winters ago at Christmas when I looked out my family room window to see four or five deer dancing and prancing, jumping in play and racing in circles around our doll house. I remember saying a prayer thanking God for this special joy that Christmas. It was an amazing sight to me.





Yes, my sights of Christmas joys are delightful, but when you get to experience Christmas through the eyes of a child, I feel the Christmas story comes alive. This holiday season, weekly worship brings the joy of Kevin and Debbie Skarsten's grandson. He radiates a joy to all of us who sit around him and watch him grow. Love "glows" to all of us around his pew as he smiles at us and jumps up and down to make us smile. One little fellow has hold of all of us. Our hearts warm as we watch Grandma Debbie rock him to sleep and we watch his mother's care. This is an unexpected joy given to us for weekly attendance at church!

God knew that it would take a Child to show the world the joy of Christmas. That "Joy to the World" came to earth in family form. An infant, Jesus, whose life still glows, saves us all. What a joy! Thank you, God! Merry Christmas!





December 22



There are so many things that I love about the Christmas season. I love the Christmas lights, getting together with friends, eating lots of food, getting cards in the mail, time with family. Everyone seems to be in a more cheerful mood. It's Christmas! And although not every aspect of the season is bright and cheery, there is a lot to remind us of what we can be truly thankful for.

It may seem a bit obvious, but when I think about what brings me joy in this season, it's the music. For me, music has a very special place in my life. Music brings people together. Whether it's singing or playing an instrument, anyone can participate no matter their ability.

What I enjoy most about music is I feel like I can express myself best through music when I'm playing my clarinet. It's truly my best voice. I feel the exact opposite when it comes to finding the right words or when writing things down. In fact, I held off as long as possible writing this because I couldn't think of what I wanted to say! I guess when it comes down to it I'm joyful for the music of the season, for the reminder that God gave each of us gifts and that he sent his best gift into this world for us.





For me the season isn't complete without hearing "Joy to the World" and "Silent Night", among others. And I get to share in a unique experience each and every year with those very songs with my wonderful husband, family, and all those around me.

Ephesians 5:18b-20

"Instead be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with Psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."



Written by: Tiffany Smith

Joy

December 23



John 1:14 says that *“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”*

The part of the Christmas season that brings me the most joy is the Christmas Eve service at church. I love all of the Advent season, especially how the church gets decorated for Christmas and how it seems to bring the congregation closer. I look forward to it for the entirety of December.

The service also helps me not lose sight of the real reason for Christmas amid the hustle and bustle of gift purchases and specialty Christmas drinks. It is always a time that my family gathers and we worship together. I love the special music we always have and holding the candles while we sing "Silent Night." It is a great reminder that Jesus is coming because he is extremely present throughout the service.

The Christmas Eve Service reminds us all to prepare to receive Him in our hearts and in our homes for Christmas.

Written by: Hannah Poyer





December 24



In the summer of 2007, I led a mission trip with middle and high school youth to Manassas, VA. When we arrived, our group joined many others for a week of service to the community in Manassas and for faith exploration and formation in the youth attending. Part of the faith piece of the week included morning and evening worship experiences with a house band. During each such experience, I remember singing the same praise and worship song, Trading My Sorrows, which was made popular by Matt Redmon. While the chorus and verses are upbeat, the bridge of the song holds some anticipation and a glimpse of something yet to come, both in the lyrics and music. I can't sing it for you (and I don't think Jeff is putting Play-a-Sound buttons, like those on kids' books, on the Advent Devotion books this year), I can share the lyrics:

*I'm pressed but not crushed persecuted but not abandoned
Struck down but not destroyed
I am blessed beyond the curse for his promise will endure
That his joy's gonna be my strength
Though the sorrow may last for the night
His joy comes with the morning*

The last two lines of the bridge have always struck a chord with me. "Though the sorrow may last for the night/His joy comes with the morning." What powerful words! And if you think of them as something visual, what might that sorrow of the night be with the joy of the morning? For me, these words became part of an experience with the birth of our daughter.

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During our Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) journey with Mara (a 28 week, 1 lb. 1 oz. micropremie), we often found it challenging to see where God was. Her arrival into the world was nothing like we had hoped or expected, and then having to leave her in the hospital when I was released was like leaving a part of my heart behind.

Our day to day existence was a very weird balance of work for Rob and myself, school for the boys, trying to find a “normal,” and a juggling of schedules and travel so Rob and I could each spend an hour and a half with Mara at St. Ann’s in Westerville. When we couldn’t be at the hospital, it was phone calls to the NICU Unit to get updates from her nurses as to how Mara was doing, where she was improving, where she was struggling, and determining if anything was so urgent that Rob or myself needed to drop everything and get to the hospital.

While I typically visited with Mara in the morning or early afternoon, Rob took the after work shift and returned home for a late dinner. Most days, this left Mara at the hospital for 12 – 17 hours without Mom or Dad. Those phone calls became our lifeline, especially at night. At midnight, right before I would go to bed, I would call to get an update. The night nurse would identify herself or himself and give us details – what had she weighed that night, how had her weight changed from the previous day, how much had she eaten, how many wet or dirty diapers had Mara had, if there were other complicating issues to be updated on and what her overall demeanor was.





Many nights, these calls were terrifying, defeating, and filled with sorrow. Nights were not Mara's prime time – she was agitated, often not eating well, and, quite frankly, there were times we didn't know if Mara would make it to the next day. Regardless, I would call to get the update and would record things in a notebook we kept all her daily events in. After taking it all in, I would be caught in the question, concern, and sorrow of it all. And, often with many tears, would say a prayer as I went to sleep.

When he woke up in the morning, Rob would call for an update and then call me with details. While not each morning, many mornings he would call to find that with the morning, Mara had calmed, she had taken a good feed, her numbers had leveled out, and she was a happier girl. The sorrows of our night would quickly be replaced with the joy of the morning to fight another day with our girl!

Like the song, and like our experience, I think JOY is a central focus of the Advent season because God is challenging us to focus our eyes on something beyond. We all carry many sorrows – stress, concern, worries, things to do – and joy sometimes seems fleeting or just out of reach. But, the anticipation of joy is to challenge us to let those burdens and sorrows stay in the night to be ready for the joy to come in the morning. No matter what, Jesus will be born on Christmas morning – a ritual and reminder of God's promise of joy and love for us to celebrate and live in, our joy in the morning!



December 25



Hall of Fame catcher Yogi Berra once said, “The future ain’t what it used to be.”

Year after year, millions of people are drawn to the sights, sounds, smells and songs of Christmas. Why? It’s simple, really. We all want to hear some good news.

Some of us are part of the “used to be” crowd. We have vague memories of a life that “used to be” simple; easier; a time when members of our families got along. We remember when we “used to be” able to believe the Good News of Christmas; that God came to earth in the flesh and blood of a human being to heal and save the world. We remember traditions that “used to be” meaningful and special.

Some of us are part of the “what is” crowd. We want to escape from “what is” in our lives right now; if only for a day like today. We want relief from “what is” happening in our lives right now. We want relief from “what is” going on in the world right now: politics, global conflicts, sexual abuse, wars, etc.

When Jesus was born, there were plenty of people





hoping to hear some good news. Many longed for a time for a time that “used to be”; a time when they were in charge of their own lives; a time when there was equity among the rich and the poor; a time when there was peace in their land; a time when they could worship God without fear.

Others longed for relief from “what was” going on in their lives in the present: the pain, the fear, the uncertainty, the abuse by a foreign power over which they had no control. They, too, were waiting for God to act in a way that would change their plight. They were hoping for a future that would be different than “what was”.

In the birth of Jesus, God acted decisively, bringing hope to those who thought that returning to the past would make life good again and to those who wanted to escape the present and all of its troubles.

God’s future begins with the birth of Jesus; right here, right now.

What is the future that God has in mind for us and the world?

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The angels who greeted the shepherds in the field when Jesus was born give us a hint: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors!” (Luke 2:14).

The word "peace" is mentioned 429 times in the Bible. God cares a lot about peace! God’s vision for a future that ain’t what it used to be is a world at peace.

We know the work of peacemaking is hard work. The seemingly endless conflicts in our homes, in the United States and abroad can make us respond cynically to anyone who talks about her hope for peace on earth. Even God has not been able to bring peace on earth... yet.

Since God promises that the future that “ain’t what it used to be” will be a time of peace on earth, God invites us to join with the One we call the Prince of Peace in the hard work of peacemaking. I like the idea that we are created co-creators, which means that we can, in fact, impact the world for good. We can, in fact, impact the future through our deeds of faith.





As Marcus Borg puts it, “We, without God, cannot. God, without us, will not.” Borg uses hyperbole to make a good point.

So when it comes to peacemaking,

- Will you be open to a future that ain’t what it used to be, in your relationships with your neighbor; your spouse; your child?
- Will you create space in your heart for the love of the Christ Child to enter in, to be born in you today and to change your future?
- Will you work for peace among the people whose lives are different than your own? Muslims? Republicans? Democrats? Liberals? Conservatives?

On this Christmas day, we celebrate the great and glorious news that, because of the birth of Jesus, your future, my future, the future of the world is filled with the promise of peace on earth.

The future ain’t what it used to be!

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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CHRISTMAS
JOY

