

# Advent Devotional 2024



First United Methodist Church  
516 Church Street  
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# December 1<sup>st</sup>

Pastor Grace Imathiu

Advent's season is one of deepest darkness. Thank goodness for whoever came up with our Christian tradition of lighting a candle every Sunday on the way to the Christmas. To get to the Christ Child, we first unwrap the wrapping of Hope, then unwrap the wrapping of Peace, then unwrap the wrapping of Joy and then unwrap the wrapping of Love. And in candlelight, I am surprised every single Christmas to see God clothed in human skin, flesh and blood, surrounded by angels singing lullabies. It reminds me of Patrick and his mother.

When I first met Patrick, he was in the deepest despair. You see, for what is Kenya's equivalent to SAT's, Patrick had scored the highest in Mathematics, both in the history of his school and in the history of his school's district. He had been admitted to Kirinyaga University to study Computer Science. But alas! his dirt-poor family could not afford the University's tuition of \$440 a year. His mother lived in a single- room shack with an open fire at the center of the room which served as her cooking area and the source of warmth when she curled up in her blanket for the night. Patrick's widowed mother had not gone past second grade. She worked as a 'daily contractor' in local farms digging potatoes in potato season, thrashing beans in bean season, and picking coffee in coffee season; daily contractors earn five dollars "cash money" a day.

In the summer of 2022, I went to Kenya on vacation, and Patrick's mother was working in my parents' farm cutting bananas and earning her five dollars a day. I overheard her telling the other contractors about her son who had been born "a very clever boy," and now he was facing a dead end, and she was convinced he would not survive the despair and would most like die by suicide like his older brother had died. She was cursing his brilliance saying, "I wish God had not cursed him with intelligence. It is doubly ruthless when poor people are smart. No poor person should be smart."

So, without thinking, I said I would pay Patrick's tuition, rent and upkeep as long as he maintained nothing less than a 3.5 GPA at the university. Although it would amount to about a thousand dollars a year, I was already sponsoring two other students, including my own, and would be hard pressed to sponsor a new addition. But when the Holy Spirit moves, the Holy Spirit moves.

Two years in with a final year looming ahead, this past June I went home on vacation, and Patrick's mother came to visit. She brought with her a gift she had carefully and tenderly carried like it was something fragile and of great value. She had a cardboard box with something wrapped in a towel. My parents gathered around me as I took the gift out of the box, unwrapped the towel, and found another wrapping of newsprint. I tore off the newsprint, and then there it was! The purplest, shiniest avocado I had ever seen in my life! It looked more like a humongous ruby than a fruit!

Patrick's mother was beaming with pride. "You were light when we were in the deepest darkness," she told me. "I ripened this avocado for you. If there is one thing I know how to do well, it is how to ripen an avocado to perfection. I carefully buried it in the ashes of the fire in my kitchen for four days." Then she burst out laughing and said "I even sang to this avocado and told it bedtime stories!"

Never has an avocado tasted so delicious! The journey to that avocado was a dark advent path lit by unimaginable hope, deep peace, glimpses of joy and an enduring fierce love of a mother. It was worth it!

## December 2<sup>nd</sup>

Virginia Lee

The beginning of Advent is a time of great hope and anticipation in the midst of waiting.

One of my favorite poets is Mary Oliver. I love her attention to all of creation, especially things we might miss or overlook like grasshoppers and the blue iris, lambs and trees. Verse four of her poem, *Sometimes*, has become a mantra or reminder for me. She writes:

Instructions for living a life:

*Pay attention.*

*Be astonished.*

*Tell about it.<sup>1</sup>*

I think this reminder is especially appropriate at Advent. Many of the scripture readings during this time remind us of being watchful or mindful during this time of hope and waiting. It is also the time of year when we are often busy and rushing to complete shopping or baking or many other activities. It is a time when it is easy to overlook or miss opportunities to be astonished.

Merriam-Webster dictionary defines *astonished* as showing great surprise and wonder. In this respect, maybe children have something to teach us. I love watching my great-nieces and great-nephews enjoy the surprise and wonder of giving and getting gifts for Christmas, as well as their enjoyment and wonder at the things they can make from all those Christmas boxes, which we adults have often noted they seem to enjoy more than the gifts.

Oliver's instructions also remind me of the magi who visited the baby Jesus. They were most certainly paying attention to the sky and stars, they were astonished enough to journey a great distance, and we know about them because their story has been told.

What have I missed during Advent when I am rushing and trying to complete my to-do list? Who might I have overlooked in my rush? When have I failed to see the hope and wonder of the season? How might I pay more attention to the scripture readings for Advent and Christmas?

My prayer during this Advent season is that we might pay closer attention so that we don't miss the hope and wonder that is ever present.

<sup>1</sup> Mary Oliver, *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), 104-106.

## December 3<sup>rd</sup>

Rev. B.J. Birkhahn-Rommelfanger

The poet Langston Hughes once wrote: “I am so tired of waiting for the world to be good and beautiful and kind.”

Advent is a time of waiting with hope for the birth of the promise of God.

It was in Advent 1985 I was pregnant with twins. I just started ministry as a pastor of a congregation in Evanston, committed to justice and one of the first Reconciling Congregations in the United Methodist Church. Life was full of new possibilities for me and the Church. It was Advent and I was awaiting the birth of two babies with both excited expectation and much fear and anxiety. How would the church respond to a woman pastor who was vulnerable, huge, and might be on bed rest, absent just when people needed her? This was a busy time to prepare for the joy of Christmas and serving the community and easing suffering – and I didn’t know if I would make it to my first Christmas! Preaching pregnant, I wondered if I would survive the birth of twins – or the babies would survive! I just wanted it to be over. I was so tired of waiting! I was also so fearful of what would be the future. I didn’t know how I could be a mother of twins and a pastor – or if the church would even let me.

The twins were born, I pastored many years, and the UM Church became Reconciling this year, 40 years later!

I learned there is no perfect Advent. Waiting in hope for the promise is one of the hardest things we do, especially as a good, kind and beautiful world seems so distant. Mary lived in a world of injustice and death, and she didn’t know the future when she was pregnant with Jesus, nor if she would survive to hold her baby.

All any of us can do is wait on God. Advent calls us to believe and commit to God’s Promise in whatever circumstances we find ourselves and our world.

## December 4<sup>th</sup>

Joe Womack

Good morning, Lord,

I want you to know that I get it.

I am insignificant in the grand scheme of things; I am an unremarkable spec in a vast universe; I am like a drop of water in the Pacific Ocean; like a grain of sand in the Sahara Desert; I am a dim star in an unimaginable number of galaxies; I am nothing, but I am all I can think about.

Yet for reasons unknowable by me, I am beloved. On this glorious morning, help me to get over myself. Help me to tolerate, respect and even love those who differ from me in looks, attitudes, perspectives, philosophies, aptitudes, circumstances and histories. Give me the discerning power to separate truth from fiction in spite of the volume of fiction purveyors.

I understand that the opposite of faith is not doubt; the opposite of faith is certainty. Deepen my faith that I may know hope rather than dread for the future, and accept that life remains full of mysteries even with expanding knowledge of the workings of the universe and life itself.

Travel with me in my life as I seek adoration for you, amazement for all the works of thy hand, and gratitude for all that life brings. Give me the grace, hope, peace and strength for the journey.

## December 5<sup>th</sup>

Joe Agne

“Listening and Changing”

The daughter of a Syrophenician mother needed healing. Her mother heard that Jesus, a healer with an ethnicity differing from hers, was in town. She hoped their ethnic differences wouldn't matter to him. She approached Jesus and her hopes were dashed when Jesus said to her, “Let the children of my people be fed first, for it is not fair to take their food and throw it to the dogs.” It seems that Jesus, possessed by ethnocentrism, just called her daughter a dog and her a bitch. (Mark 7:24–30 and Matthew 15:21–28)

It may be that Jesus began to wonder about his own response, especially when she confronted him: “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.” Did this help Jesus question why he said his mission was just to his own people? Evidently, Jesus listened, really listened, and then changed. He said, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.”

This was really a healing exchange for both of them. The demon was gone from the daughter. The demon of ethnic exclusivity, carefully taught to him by his culture, was gone from Jesus. Maybe the Syrophenician mother was one of the forces that pushed Jesus to serve beyond his own people.

Jesus showed how all of us, even men, can let go of defensiveness and actually listen and change. This is a Christmas gift I hope to receive this year.

## December 6<sup>th</sup>

Dan Owens

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Romans 15:13

Advent is a season of expectation, with annual rhythms and rituals that prepare us for something wonderful that is to come. In many ways, it is a season of light and bursting with joy! At the same time, advent also falls at a time when sunlight seems all too fleeting here in Evanston as the days grow shorter. The absence of those we have lost - recently or too long ago - can feel especially acute as their chair at the holiday table or place in the pew sits empty.

When darkness threatens to crowd out the light, a powerful opportunity emerges for hope to step in. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu observed, “Hope is being able to see that there is light, despite all the darkness.”

What does hope look like for you this advent season?

Where are you looking for the light to shine in?

## December 7<sup>th</sup>

Dennis Barbour

As Emily Dickinson wrote,

“Hope” is the thing with feathers –

That perches in the soul - And sings the tune without the words –

And never stops - at all–”

As Paul writes, three important aids for Christians are Faith, HOPE, and Charity. Hope is one of the gifts God gives us to cope with the hardships of life. He sent Jesus to our world to give us Hope in a dark time, not unlike the time we live in today where conflict and destruction, hatred and division, are ever-present.

Jesus exemplified Hope in bringing us a richer alternative life of love, healing, and giving to combat the evils of obsession with money and power, bringing a message of the true values that those qualities can bring. He simply put His Father’s will for us in human terms. In this Advent season, let’s embrace His message of Hope which brings light to our too-often dark world.

## December 8<sup>th</sup>

Linda Brennan

In our fast-paced culture, Advent can be a period of anxiety and stress. Did I buy the right gifts? Will we send the Christmas cards in time? Why are we hosting both extended families for Christmas Eve? Can we agree on how much to decorate the house? Which party should we go to? How will I make it through the holidays without my loved one?

The prophet Isaiah (26:3) tells us that we will keep perfect PEACE if our minds are steadfast in our trust in God. In his letter to the Romans (15:13), Paul writes “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Bombarded by the commercial aspects of Christmas, it can be incredibly difficult to guard our hearts and minds. Of course, coming to church helps. Lighting advent candles at home helps. Setting up a nativity scene helps. Downplaying the role of Santa helps. Praying for peace helps. Listening to Christmas hymns instead of secular music helps. Setting realistic expectations of yourself helps.

Most importantly, though, is to let go of the things we cannot control and turn such things over to God. We can only control our thoughts, words, and actions.

Let go of what is not important and experience the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding to guard your heart and mind through Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:7). This is the real purpose of Christmas.

## December 9<sup>th</sup>

Julia Jackson

During the Covid pandemic, my family spent a month or so in Florida to escape from the same four walls we had been staring at for the past year. While my husband was working remotely and our daughters were busy with their on-line schoolwork, I took up an old hobby of cross-stitching. I completed four small projects during that visit, each with a Christmas subject matter: a church in the snow, Joseph and Mary looking at Jesus in the manger, the Three Kings bearing gifts, and the image shown here of holly and ivy. The holly symbolizes Jesus' crown of thorns and the berries represent the blood that he shed, while the ivy symbolizes eternal life in Christ. As we are busy decking our halls this season and preparing for the birth of Jesus, let us remember that beautiful old hymn "The Holly and The Ivy," and have hope for good health in the coming year and peace knowing that one day we will have eternal life in heaven.





## December 10<sup>th</sup>

Joe Bare

Though the Anabaptist congregation that began Men's Breakfast no longer exists, I still meet with a dozen or so friends once a month. We chat for an hour and then read a passage or article for discussion. It has been and continues to be an important part of my life.

I appreciated and valued having a space separate from my family to hash out ideas and perhaps delicate topics in a safe environment where I respect and expect contrary views; to talk about our roles as men in a church community and society as Christians.

I wanted to share this experience with the Advent Episcopal Church in Logan Square that I began attending in 2011, another small church that hasn't been able to withstand financial and demographic challenges to mainline Protestantism. It was a success! Men loved getting together in an informal way.

When my Advent men church friends attend Men's Breakfast with their husbands, the "separate space" concept challenges men's issues concept. Then one of the attendees transitioned to her preferred gender and the whole idea of a separate Men's Breakfast came up for examination. I shared this challenge with my original group. How do we capture what we are doing here – examining explicit male gender roles in Christianity and Community – in an inclusive and uplifting way?

The idea of the "Peace Warrior" came up in several different contexts over several years in both groups. For example, Anabaptists struggle reconciling "pacifism" with outreach and positive change. We want to be a people that celebrates peace and abhors war, but we also need to acknowledge evil and take positive action against it.

The Peace Warrior points to the dynamism and active participation required in the face of evil and attempts to align with the path Jesus calls us to. Sometimes masculinity is used as a shorthand that elides a much more nuanced approach to the Christian walk and is exclusionary.

The rebranded "Peace Warrior Breakfast" invited all genders and family configurations to an examination of walking the path. It's a different kind of meeting but still valuable and nourishing.

# December 11<sup>th</sup>

James Hagedorn

I must confess a sin at the start of this reflection. Not a transgression against God or creation, but more of missing the mark. Here goes: As a reader and after a few chapters in a book, if the story has me interested, I will peek at the ending of the story. And hope for more or a sequel. And of course, ask mercy for my “sin.”

This reminds me of the Advent story as part of God’s disclosure to us through the Scriptures. This time I do not have to “peek” at the end. This time I know the end of the story, or do I? Jesus is brutally murdered by the empire; comes back to life; and takes His rightful place at God’s right hand. But is that the end? ...what comes next?

The Gospel stories that we read during Advent<sup>1</sup> hint at what the rest of the story might look like... Of darkness and fear and the end of times; of judgment; of mercy and hope, of God’s new thing...the fullness of a coming Kin-dom.<sup>2</sup>

Theologian Laurence Hull Stookey writes. *“In fact, the primary focus of Advent is on what is popularly called the ‘second coming.’ Thus, Advent concerns the future of the Risen One, who will judge wickedness and prevail over every evil. Advent is the celebration of the promise that Christ will bring an end to all that is contrary to the ways of God; the resurrection of Jesus is the first sign of this destruction of the powers of death, the inauguration and anticipation of what is yet to come in fullness.”*<sup>3</sup>

As I reflect on Advent, I pray that all the preparation and reflection we do in this season guides strengthening our faith.<sup>4</sup> That faith that leads us, both individually and in community...as kin in the “kin-dom,” to live the virtues of hope, of love; to experience peace and joy as its fruits in our present time. And that faith that imagines the future trusting that... *“because of the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to shine upon those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”*<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The Gospel Lectionary texts for year C: Luke 21:25-36; Luke 1:69-79; Luke 3:7-18; Luke 1:39-45.

<sup>2</sup> Kin-dom of God as a concept was popularized by theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz as a modern understanding of God’s activity in and through Christian communities, connoting inclusion, care, mutual support, solidarity, and unity...an ethic that calls us to treat one another as family (kin).

<sup>3</sup> Laurence Hull Stookey, *Calendar Christ’s Time for the Church*, (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN)1996;121.

<sup>4</sup> Hebrews 11:1 “the confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we don’t see.”

<sup>5</sup> Luke 1: 78-79, NRSVUE. (from the second Sunday of Advent lectionary text)

## December 12<sup>th</sup>

David Smith

Advent and everything that leads up to Christmas is precisely the time when peace may be in short supply.

I'm my own worst enemy. I'm the one that creates unrealistic expectations. There are too many lights to string after finally finding the perfect tree. There are too many presents to perfectly wrap. I spend days preparing Beef Wellington and setting the table. Without meaning to, I put so many obligations on myself that Christmas can be one of the most stressful times of the year.

I need to search for peace. I need to take a break and find a way for peace to be possible, even in this chaotic, too-full time. I need to pray. In the poem *Praying*, Mary Oliver says "this isn't a contest but the doorway into thanks, and a silence in which another voice may speak." Only when I calm myself can I begin to discern God's voice and His purpose for my life. In that silence I find peace. God's grace becomes tangible and fills me with joy.

Peace allows me to give myself a break. Even last Christmas when I had to order out Chinese because the refrigerator died, everything turned out just fine.

Peace allows me to see clearly. Sometimes it's the simplest things that bring me the greatest joy—a Christmas card from an old friend, the naughty shepherd boy in the Christmas pageant, an inexpensive gift that is perfect because the giver knows me so well. These are the things I need to prioritize during Advent.

May you find peace this Advent season!

# December 13<sup>th</sup>

Colin McDonald

## **Aways From the Manger: Receiving the Gift of Advent at Pentecost**

*“When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”* John 20:22 (NRSV)

John’s Gospel recounts a significant, if subtle, felt expression of the Holy Spirit’s movement in our lives as Jesus, incredulously in the flesh, breathes on His disciples. Having moments earlier granted them “peace,” followed by a non sequitur of sorts that they, too, are about to be, in a word — or breath — *sent*, the shock value has less to do with Christ’s appearance than an unspoken, embodied acceptance, insofar as the pronouncement itself sounds unheard of or at least not in keeping with the conversation up till then. Sent where? To do what exactly? And what on earth, in retrospect, could the Son of Man have meant by “peace”? The anxiety is implicit, if not palpable; the disciples’, that is, and by extension — by faith — our own, inwardly assuring us (as is the Holy Spirit’s want) that fear is never ours alone and rarely what we had in the privacy and fixation of our own mind. “Receive the Holy Spirit,” Jesus says in the same breath, without warning, without question; a hesitance turned on its head; a sudden, semi-urgent game of catch. It seems that to be sent is to be with, to turn toward the unknown as if having once met. It seems, in other words, that the story of Christ’s death and resurrection was with us, so to speak, from the moment “the Word became flesh.” John 1:14 (NRSV)

The week leading up to Pentecost I was sweating it myself, attempting to turn the uncannily good news of John 20:19-23 into a relatable, if not laugh a minute, children’s sermon while continuing to write thank you cards and organize loose pictures of my father from his funeral in early May. A minister himself, I’d figured he’d have the good sense not to die during Holy Week, and I was right. What I couldn’t predict was how his death, the first and last in a series of untimely and ill-coordinated departures as a result of his long-impeded distance with frontotemporal dementia, would ultimately resonate. As I looked into his eyes on film, far longer than I ever had in life, increasingly aware of our resemblance, I was confronted with his character, in some ways unpredictable in sickness as in health. Teeming with nervous energy, my father’s unselfconscious availability came over me like a wind I’d walked decidedly against, as if held fast, for many years, presenting all at once a world between my internal stance and latent admiration. What scared me about him and what, at times, his disease stressed like a syllable was what I claim to want more of in others: an affable and impractical commitment above all to being with.

A cognitive dissonance rang out as Pentecost drew near, as I drew nearer its symbol of flame to see it has the power to compel us less by force than by degrees of our distance from that which sets fire to staying put. Christ’s birth, it struck me then, is such a catalyst, endearing us to ourselves, reminding us we’re made to come close, to feel breath warm against our skin, to have and hold by virtue of our being held. I prayed my father had something of me still as I surveyed the distance between what I had and what I had been given; an ongoing process as long as the love it is learning to answer. Perhaps with the children I would introduce a bell.

Before his death, through testing, we had all but ruled out a genetic disposition, leaving me free to imagine the future was still an unknown. As I stopped working to read one of my father’s otherwise free-associated sermons, however, I had a change of heart. “Does everyone who encounters you soon realize that God is fundamentally about joy?” he wrote. Who was I kidding? All of us are predisposed.

## December 14<sup>th</sup>

Mari Leonard

My favorite time of year has always been Christmas time. I find immense joy in my life in general through experiences and things both great and small. But there is something about this time of year that is more joyous than any other time. I think both the religious and secular traditions that we practice year after year have to do with bringing joy to the forefront in our lives. I find joy in the weekly services, with the lighting of the Advent Wreath, marking the coming of the gift of Christ to our world.

I find joy in Christmas trees, from the one in my living room decked with ornaments that tell the history of my family and the story of my life, to the Star Tree that stands in Fountain Foyer, helping us to create the magic of the season for children in our community who might not get to experience it otherwise.

Sometimes during Advent, we witness the first snowfall of the year, which shows us of the magic and majesty of God's Creation.

The food traditions of the Advent season are another source of joy. There are coffee cakes, casseroles and Christmas cookies baked from recipes that have been passed down through families, and bring folks that are long gone from this earth back to us when we share this food.

There are traditions that we create, like a group of FUMC families that have been attending Christmas Eve worship and sharing dinner together that evening for close to two decades. Joy in the kitchen and around the table. And when we gather in the sanctuary for Christmas Eve service, or Zoom it from home, we sing Joy to the World. Year after year, all of us singing that rousing hymn together almost makes my heart burst with joy.

As you practice your Advent traditions this year, I pray that you pay attention to all the joys, large and small, in all of them, and carry that joy into 2025.

## December 15<sup>th</sup>

Amy Schumacher

We are all grappling with darkness these days. This comes in many forms. Fears for the future and for our loved ones. Less daylight. Worry about climate catastrophe. Dismay about the polarization of this country and world.

A coworker of mine recently reminded me, “light shines brightest in the dark”, and I have been sitting with the opportunity and invitation that offers. This world will always be filled with darkness, but we can all be a light and love to one another. The darkest moments are when we need to show ourselves as light so others can find their way and shine their own light.

Jesus came into this world to be light and love to the world. Who are we not to accept and share that gift? How might we be light and love to one another?

Where have you experienced light recently? How have you been light to someone who needed it?

## December 16<sup>th</sup>

Jackie Owens

It’s easy for me to get caught up in all the evidence against joy. The more awareness I have grown for the hurting across our own community and the world, as well as my own place of privilege within these systems, the more joy has seemed like a complete disregard for the pain of others.

Even when I am not bogged down by big global or personal crises, the day-to-day nuisances seem to chip away at my joy: the forgotten coffee on the counter, the bad mood of a coworker or client, the child resisting bedtime, the annoyance of driving across Evanston at rush hour.

Yet God calls us to joy. Joy is one of the fruits of the spirit and an evidence of living our life in union with God. Jesus even prayed for his disciples’ joy. In John 17 he goes to God on their behalf, asking that they may share in his joy completely. He recognizes the ways that those early believers were rejected by the world because of him and asks that they might still be able to find joy.

- Reflecting on John 17, what would it feel like to know that Jesus went to God on *your* behalf, asking for you to experience joy?
- How can we pray for the people of First Church to become a community whose joy is ‘complete’?
- When joy does not come easy, how do you effortfully practice joy?
- How can we as a church be a source of joy for our wider community during this advent season?

## December 17<sup>th</sup>

Mary Cauble and Bonny Roth

### **Remaining Oriented to Joy and Peace**

*We shall go out in joy and be led forth into peace. And the mountains and hills before us shall break forth into singing and the trees shall clap their hands. (Isaiah 55:12, paraphrase)*

*Let all we do be done in love. (1 Corinthians 16:14, paraphrase)*

Every morning we recite together these verses from Isaiah and 1 Corinthians. The verses, along with others, center us and remind us that we are called all day long to be open to the joy and peace of God's grace. Not a rose-colored joy or peace, but a deep, abiding presence that sustains us during times of celebration and, perhaps more importantly, during times of sorrow and pain. During this Advent season of waiting for the return of the Messiah, we are particularly mindful of painful places in our midst and throughout the world. How do we remain joy-filled, hope-filled, peace-filled people?

Could we take this time to open our hearts, arms, and souls and renew our orientation to the Holy One? Could we make this a time to review our way of being in the world? Could we look inward and find our dark places of anger, resentment, hurt, and fear? Could we allow Divine light to enter those places with healing that allows us to live with a peaceful, peace-filled heart of love?

We invite you to consider taking two minutes each day to reflect on what brings you joy and peace. Then move outward with openness, joy, and non-anxious peace.

*Our evening prayer:* God of love and light, help us to be love and light in the world. Amen.

## December 18<sup>th</sup>

Andrew Schumacher

One day this past summer, my daughter and I stopped at Penny Park on the way to day camp. Upon returning to the car, I soon heard that dreaded clicking sound when pushing the "On" button. The car wouldn't start- fortunately for us a very rare occurrence - and in my daughter's life, her first ever such experience. She immediately began worrying about how we were stranded and wouldn't make it to camp. Luckily, with just a few taps on my phone, we had a rescue plan. No more than four minutes later, the world's most genuinely kind, joyful, and supportive Lyft driver pulled up to save the day. I can't remember exactly all he said, but he immediately grasped the situation (and my daughter's anxiousness) and put us at ease. He whisked us away and made it his mission to get her to camp on time, reminding us along the way that even with this setback, it was going to be a great day.

For some reason, I keep coming back to this Lyft driver. At the time, I recall nearly crying as he felt like a true Godsend. There was something about his unexpected joy and care that I can't get over. I've always believed in the idea of encountering Jesus in other people, often in what seem like unlikely circumstances. This felt like one of those times.

As we journey through Advent, I wonder how we might be watching and waiting for joy in unexpected people and places. Surely our ancestors waiting for the Messiah to come and rule over all the Earth found unexpected joy in a baby born in the most unlikely circumstances.

Where might you find Jesus' love and joy waiting for you to experience it this season?

# December 19<sup>th</sup>

Fay Godman

I Trust . . . . .

. . . that earth is the space to be alive and to move -  
to see and to savor, to touch and to tend, to hear and to harbor - life.

. . . that life is the God-given Covenant of Goodness to be sensed in nature,  
and shared with humankind throughout the earth.

. . . that God is love - the power that evokes and energizes humans  
to relate, redeem, and to celebrate one another - over time.

. . . that time is a gift that transcends understanding, and  
remains relevant to all life on earth - until death.

. . . that death is the point in time and in space,  
where the finite in life becomes infinite. Amen.

*Originally written June 2020*



## December 20<sup>th</sup>

Lee Rader

### *TO A VIRGIN RETURNING*

*To a virgin returning  
late in this life  
Pregnant now with hope  
having carried this child  
for more years  
than she ever thought  
she or the ass could bear.  
She shifts her body often now  
as the weight of the child  
presses impatiently upon every internal crevasse of her being  
dying to be free*

*And the Blessed One of long ago  
well-acquainted with the throbs of longing  
draws close to her heaving side  
and takes the virgin's hand  
and holds it  
long into the night.*

*For B. who was serving a life sentence in Missouri  
Originally written Christmas 1999*

## December 21<sup>st</sup>

Greg Pool

### A Christmas Tree Decoration

I once had an Aunt Mary by marriage. She was the youngest daughter in a big immigrant family that thrived in a small northern Indiana town, with the Amish living on nearby farms, in which before WWII, the sermons were in German, and the men and women, boys and girls, sat on different sides of the church, which was heated in winter by a stove that the boys fired with wood early before the service. Mary seemed different from her siblings. She had married a Catholic. Notre Dame was close. She had raised a family, a son and a daughter. She was my mother's age, but the son had been killed as a teen in a car crash in Florida I was told. She was quiet and we didn't see her much.

My wife and I had lived in a small house on the fringes of Evanston most of our married life and we liked the area and since we had enjoyed modest success, as our family grew, we decided to move deeper into Evanston. We bought a bigger house and had it remodeled. We, at least I, thought we had arrived. Our first Christmas in the bigger house was special and Mary told us she had a small gift that she wanted to give us the next time we came to visit our parents. She presented us with a Christmas tree decoration. A surprise Christmas tree decoration. It was a nail. A spike on a ribbon for hanging. I hung it deep within the Christmas tree. Hidden really.

I forgot about the spike from Aunt Mary until the tree was taken down and out in January. Then I remembered it.

## December 22<sup>nd</sup>

Marge Bradford

Hope, Peace, Love, Joy  
And Your Advent Wreath

Gather your greens, and gather to yourself the promise of Hope.

Breathe in the fragrance of the hope for Peace.

Light the candles and breathe in Love.

Lift your prayers with Joy.

Walk each day in Hope, Peace, Love and Joy.

**December 23<sup>rd</sup>**

Jean Clipperton



# Lovingkindness

Delight in the ephemeral.

Live with an open heart  
and your palm outstretched.

Greet your joys, sadness, and  
anger with the knowledge that  
as summer turns to fall, this  
too shall pass. ♥

# December 24<sup>th</sup>

Sydney Harkrider

## *Advent Poem of Love*

In the quiet of December, under a star's soft light,  
Advent's gentle promise fills the heart with sacred sight.  
Candles glow with warmth, a tender, hopeful flame,  
Calling us to open hearts and embrace a holy name.

In winter's quiet moment, a story comes to birth,  
Of justice and compassion, reshaping all our worth.  
Mary's strength, and Joseph's care, embrace the holy call,  
As a child of humble beginnings brings peace to one and all.

Angels sing of justice, where no one is unseen,  
Voices rise for all who seek a world that's truly free.  
A promise of inclusion, where each soul finds their place,  
Where love transcends all barriers, in every time and space.

Each candle lit with reverence, each prayer a gentle plea,  
For a world transformed by mercy, where all are truly free.  
Advent calls us to remember, in the stillness and the light,  
That peace is born among us, in love's eternal night.

So as we journey forward, with hearts both open wide,  
We welcome Christ's own presence, as our loving guide.  
In the sacred time of Advent, where every soul is seen,  
We find a world renewed in love, where all can live redeemed.