

2014 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

Scripture: Revelation 12:1-12

November 30, 2014

THE LION OF JUDAH IS HERE

“Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of His Christ” (Revelation 12:10; see also Psalm 2; Genesis 49:9-10).

When you hear the word Christmas, what do you think of? Odds are a cosmic battle is not the first thing in your mind. Until recently, I did not put these two together, but now it interjects itself into my daily life. Previously, I would have conjured up images of angels bringing “tidings of great joy.” How do battles and pain play into this great joy?

I think we often fall victim to the idea that once we get rid of all the un-joyful things in life, *then* we can experience joy. But the truth is: we do not experience joy in a vacuum. Joy is not something we get all by itself. No, in this world, joy is always experienced alongside pain. A child is born, Christian brothers and sisters die tragically, and there are many more examples.

It is in the swirling chaos and fierce opposition that a woman cries out in pain as she gives birth to the king of the new creation. The dragon unleashes his might, but to no avail. The good king is here, and that great serpent is struck down. My heart breaks at the injustice in the world. No government has yet to eliminate oppression, but the one with the iron scepter has come. The Lion of Judah appears on the scene and, with a roar, He breaks the chains that bind creation. A new kingdom has come. Justice is rolling down like a river, and it is spreading. We get to take part in this ushering in of the new kingdom, and one day He will set all things right. *This* is our joy. Merry Christmas! The Lion of Judah is here!

Caleb Blankenship grew up in WFMC where he met his wife, Chloe. He serves in the youth ministry and Bible quizzing. He has the honor of serving as a delegate to the New South Conference and being a member of the NSC Board of Administration.



WILMORE FREE METHODIST CHURCH

A COMMUNITY THAT REFLECTS JESUS' VISION AND VALUES

WELCOME BACK

But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in Him you will have life by the power of His name (John 20:31 NLT).

A thousand springs feed the Davidson River as it wanders through Pisgah National Forest in North Carolina. Fly casters whip lures, angling for lunkers in her pristine waters every summer.

I was a young teen when mother finally gave in and dropped me at the ranger station while she ran errands. Soon I was casting a Mepps spinner up stream, letting it drift with the current until I could crank it through still pockets where trout love to hunt.

Time stalled as the river absorbed my full attention, so I didn't hear my signal: mom's blaring horn. Finally, I followed a narrow creek and climbed to the road, proud of my heavy stringer.

Shortly, I spied mom round the curve, where she had turned into a pull off.

"Where have you been? Didn't you hear me blowing the horn?" She didn't have to say, "I was worried about you." Then she took me in her arms for a quick hug. Evidently mom was so filled with joy at my safe return she lost the impulse to browbeat me for my poor judgment and inattention.

A thousand life experiences set us up for Advent. Wade happily into that river of witness and you can't miss the Messiah's presence. God does not worry about us, but patiently the Christ calls our name, and then opens His arms, always filled with joy at our return.

Ed Bryson is Adult Bible Fellowship director at WFMC and Hayden's "Papa." He collects colorful idioms.

THE DARK SIDE OF CHRISTMAS

"A voice was heard in Ramah,... Rachel weeping for her children;... Because they were no more" (Matthew 2:18 NASB).

One of my favorite rituals of the Advent season is watching Frank Capra's classic film, *It's a Wonderful Life*. Movie critics have sometimes ridiculed this movie for its sentimentality, calling it "Capra-corn." But the striking thing about this film is not its sentimentality but rather its darkness. It was extraordinary for holiday films of that period to feature attempted suicide. There is a dark backdrop to this Christmas movie. And this sober backdrop is appropriate, for there is a black background to Christmas.

The story of the birth and infancy of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel reveals the depth of human evil through the portrayal of King Herod. When Herod hears that the magi are inquiring where the king of the Jews has been born, King Herod thinks not of the deliverance this king will bring to a people long oppressed by sin (2:5-6), but only of the threat to his rule. His desire to maintain his own control leads him to commit one of the cruelest acts recorded in the Bible, the mass murder of the Bethlehem male infants. This is sin in its most horrific form. But it reflects the destructive self-serving and self-asserting attitudes that all of us experience.

It is precisely this sin, violence, and destruction that make Christmas necessary. Christmas will remain merely a nostalgic interlude from winter if we fail to see that we can experience the joy and brightness of Christmas only against the backdrop of the sin from which only the Christ of Christmas can deliver us: "[F]or He will save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21 NASB).

David R. Bauer is Professor of Inductive Biblical Studies and Dean of the School of Biblical Interpretation at Asbury Theological Seminary. He is the father of Christopher and has been a member of the WFMC for 30 years.

Scripture: Psalm 28:7

December 3, 2014

JOYOUS IN THE SNOW

The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in Him, and I am helped. My heart leaps for joy and I will give thanks to Him in song (Psalm 28:7).

There are times in life of pure exhilarating joy. Such was the Christmas season when our dad made a bobsled for Dave, my brother, and me. We were old enough to be trusted with more advanced sledding rather than using our ancient red and green sled. Dad welded together metal pipes for the runners of the sled. In our part of Ohio we had rolling hills but mostly flat farmland. So when it came time to look for good places to sled, naturally, the best place was “Keefer’s Hill.” We hiked through the woods to the neighbor’s farm. The Keefer family welcomed us and our friends every time we had what we called a “good snow.” Everyone brought their sleds and saucers. But no one had a sled such as ours! Oh, what a ride that sled gave us! When the pipes got wet from the snow, they were slick, and we fairly flew down that hill, screaming and hollering all the way! Of course, everyone wanted a ride, and we quickly learned how much fun it was for all of us kids to share what we had until we were so cold we could no longer feel our fingers and toes. We would trudge back through the woods, our sled lightly gliding along behind us, frozen and worn out, but with hearts brimming with pure joy. Later on, Tom and Cat, our younger siblings, inherited the grand bobsled and, for certain, experienced that same exhilarating joy.

My heart is thankful for parents and family who taught and grounded us in the strength and joy of knowing and serving the one true God. With Him as the center of life, joy is found all around.

Fran May and her husband, Barry, have two children and five grandchildren. Fran is retired from “the best vocation ever,” elementary education.

Scripture: Psalm 126:3

December 4, 2014

THE JOY OF FAMILY

The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy (Psalm 126:3).

God has given us an unimaginable gift, His Son, and we celebrate Him this Christmas season. During this time, and throughout the year, we continually give thanks and are grateful for the gift of two children and five grandchildren in our family. Over these many years in raising and enjoying our children, we always asked for the Lord’s guidance and wisdom in raising them to become like Christ and to make a difference in a needy world. The same can be said as we pray for our grandchildren that, after accepting the Lord as their Savior, they all will grow in their faith and walk with the Lord as He sheds light and guidance on their respective paths.

Recently our son shared a story regarding our granddaughter in Ohio who is a junior in high school. She plays on her school’s soccer and basketball teams. The Lord has led her to begin a chapter of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes at her school. The first meeting had five student athletes in attendance. At the next meeting, 23 were in attendance, including three coaches. Praise the Lord for more young lives being touched. Every point of growth in our family, big or small, brings us joy!

As Christians, we thank and praise God for His Son, the unspeakable gift, who brings great joy to those who believe.

Barry May says he has been blessed with a dear and loving wife and family. He has been involved in Christian higher education for 41 years, the last 10 of them at Asbury University. He retired from Asbury in 2007 as professor and department chair of Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Athletics.

Scripture: 1 Samuel 9:24

December 5, 2014

TO KEEP JOY IS TO KEEP YOUR EYES ON THE LORD

Samuel said, "Here is what has been kept for you. Eat, because it was set aside for you for this occasion...." And Saul dined with Samuel that day (1 Samuel 9:24).

It sometimes is a great joy to sit, eat, and talk with somebody who is important, especially for those of us who think of ourselves as nobodies. As an international student at Asbury Seminary and a Chinese house church minister, I can imagine what great joy, excitement, as well as nervousness, Saul experienced that day when he dined with Samuel and the elders. Saul was honored by the man of God before the people of God. Finally, he became the first king of Israel (1 Samuel 13:1).

However, as his fame and power grew, Saul forgot that day God exalted him in front of important people. He especially forgot the truth that it is God who raised him up from the least and the smallest (9:21). Saul chose not to fully obey God's command, for he feared the people (15:24). Much worse, after he realized his sin, he did not choose repentance (15:30). Saul became jealous of David, later king, finally becoming a slave to his need for people's honor. It was a dark day for Saul when he walked out of God's presence, totally losing his joy (18:10, 12).

As we grow in our Christian faith and as our ministries grow, it is wise to remember that day when the Lord called us out of our meaninglessness. Particularly, remember that the Lord is the only one who promises us joy and power for ministry. Never fear people or seek honor from people rather than from the only God.

Zu Jian and Leah Lee Rao are from Beijing, China, where they worked and served the house church for many years till ZJ came to study at Asbury Theological Seminary. They married in 2011 and have two children, Maria and Elijah. Leah is a full-time mother and a member of the WFMC choir.

Scripture: John 1:1-18

December 6, 2014

DO NOT TAKE THE LIGHT LIGHTLY

The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it (John 1:5).

Christmas time is a time of lights and decorations and celebration of the little baby Jesus, but we are often guilty of watering down the full implication of His birth. It is surely a great reason to celebrate and be joyful, but we must never forget that Jesus is the Word who became flesh. He is the Word about whom the Psalmist said, "Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path" (Psalm 119:105). He is God, entering the darkness as a light that the world does not understand.

Light is everywhere during the Christmas season. The star above the manger, the brilliant angels, the lights we hang on the tree, and the lit candles should all remind us of the true Light which has come. Just as someone born blind would have no concept of light if he could suddenly see, unless we remember why He came and what He did, we celebrate without understanding the Light. We must be careful to still recognize Him, the Powerful Word and Light amidst the celebration.

Andrew Wittenberg, the son of Chris and Annette Wittenberg, has grown up in WFMC. He is a sophomore student at Asbury University where he plans a double major in music and accounting.

WHERE TO LOOK FOR JOY

When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy (Matthew 2:10 NKJV).

For many people, Christmas is the time for receiving and giving presents. They are filled with joy when they receive one. For Christians, Christmas is filled with the excitement and joy of the birth of the Savior. In the New Testament, when the three wise men, who were searching for the Christ child saw the star, they were filled with joy. They were filled with joy because they found the way to the child who would be their king. We should, like the three wise men, be filled with joy when we come before Christ.

When we experience things that fill us with joy, we do them over and over again, because joy is a good emotion to feel. When we experience things that are sorrowful, we try to avoid those situations.

When Jesus was born, God gave all of humanity the opportunity to be saved and life forever with Him, to feel joy for all eternity. David writes, “And my soul shall be joyful in the Lord: it shall rejoice in His salvation” (Psalm 35:9 NKJV). True and lasting joy cannot be found in material things on earth. But the only way we can know the joy of the Lord is through the salvation that He offers. Let us be like the three wise men, filled with joy when we come before the Lord, the Savior of the world.

Rachel Wittenberg is the daughter of Chris and Annette Wittenberg. She is currently a sophomore at Eastern Kentucky University, majoring in criminal justice with a minor in art history. She has attended WFMC for about 14 years.

JOY—OUR PLANS VS. GOD’S WAY

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13 NRSV).

Christmas is a time of joy and thanksgiving for God’s sending His Son to be born as a baby to redeem mankind. His coming made an astounding difference to the world and to individuals that persists after 2,000 years. An angel of the Lord told the shepherds that first Christmas night, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people” (Luke 2:10). However, the joy the people living then expected was peace through freedom from Roman domination, brought by the Messiah. Instead, His coming left them in their same culture but offered an inner joy to those who believed His teaching about a new relationship with God, His Father. The joy of the Good News is God’s message of hope for this life on earth, and on through eternity. As our example, “Jesus...who for the sake of the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken His seat at the right hand of God” (Hebrews 12:2).

In our relationship with God, we often have our own ideas as to what God should do. God’s way often does not fit our assumptions. Joseph’s experiences certainly are not what he would have chosen (Genesis 37, 39, 40). However, Joseph tells his brothers, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good” (Genesis 50:20). When Gideon was called to battle the Midianites, he started with 32,000 men, but the Lord said, “You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands” (Judges 7:2). Gideon ended up with 300 men and was victorious.

Ted and Gladys Sufferidge are natives of Kansas. They lived in Lexington for 46 years. Ted taught mathematics at the University of Kentucky for 44 years. They have four adult children.

Scripture: Luke 2:8-20

December 9, 2014

EXPERIENCE THE JOY

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about" (Luke 2:15).

Try to imagine yourself as one of the shepherds in the field that night. Going about your business shepherding sheep, you suddenly are blinded by the glory of the Lord and an angel not only appears to you but speaks: "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people" (Luke 2:10). Christ the Lord is here! The Anointed One is no longer someone they are hoping for but here and now, in the flesh, the baby Jesus in a manger.

The shepherds' initial reaction to the appearance of the angel is simply stated: "they were terrified." But after the angels had left and things were "back to normal" in the fields, they came to their senses and decided hearing was not enough. They wanted to know the Savior of the world. The good news of great joy was here and now in Bethlehem. "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

At Christmas, we hear the story, sing the songs, gather with family, and exchange gifts as a way to celebrate His birth. But when was the last time you were a shepherd and went to Bethlehem to see Him yourself? Have you ever got all alone on Christmas Eve, quieted your spirit, and simply looked into the manger? Imagine no one else is present, just you and baby Jesus. Take in the simplicity and majesty of the Savior.

This Christmas go to Bethlehem and see Him for yourself. Experience the joy of knowing Jesus as your Savior.

Larry and Jan Winkleman moved to Nicholasville Thanksgiving weekend 2013 and began attending WFMC. They have three children and four grandchildren.

Scripture: Psalm 100:4

December 10, 2014

GLORY TO GOD ALWAYS!

Enter His gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise; give thanks to Him and praise His name (Psalm 100:4).

The holiday calendar from November to the New Year resonates with joy. The psalmist unknowingly captures the temporal sequence of today's calendar perfectly: Thanksgiving comes first and then Christmas. He reflects the sequence of worship by pilgrims to Jerusalem singing psalms of thanks to God for His provision and salvation. Entering the temple with thanks, their joy spilled over into praise. So does ours from Thanksgiving to Christmas.

While thanksgiving and praise during Advent may characterize the season, it can be more. We can develop the habit of giving thanks and praise to the Lord year-round. Every time God pours grace into our lives, He waits for a response. We acknowledge His great gift of a Savior at Christmas and Easter. Glory to God! But the joy of thanks and praise can be habits of the heart year-round in response to His year-round grace. We need only let the joy of the Lord spill over into our New Year resolutions with a commitment to "Rejoice in the Lord always" (Philippians 4:4). Thanks and glory be to God always!

Be joyful always.

1 Thessalonians 5:16

Dr. Jonathan Raymond is President Emeritus of Trinity Western University in Langley, British Columbia. He and his wife, Irene, attend the Wilmore Free Methodist Church.

Scripture: Luke 2:14

December 11, 2014

THE JOYFUL MYSTERY

“Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men” (Luke 2:14 NKJV).

In the late 1990’s I chose an elderly Jesuit priest, Father Hank, as my spiritual director and confessor. We were very different men with very different views of Christ, the church, and our visions of ministry, but we had a very genuine respect and affection for each other. And we agreed we were both awed by the way the Creator God chose to infiltrate mankind and redeem His creation from the inside out. The Joyful Mystery of the Incarnation was what Father Hank called it. The Joyful Mystery. The ultimate new beginning. And I agree.

In my work during the past 25 years as a psychotherapeutic pastoral counselor, it continues to amaze me how Christ, The Joyful Mystery incarnate, continues the Creator’s work of recreating people from the inside out, activating the image of God at the heart of each soul and guiding those who are willing forward into a fuller, deeper life story. The Joyful Mystery is that the Divine wants to live His story in and through each of us!

So now during this Advent season, this season of new beginnings, I encourage you to join with Father Hank and me and all the Christ ones everywhere in celebrating the Joyful Mystery of our Creator’s outstanding love. And with the angels in Heaven, let us proclaim from the heart of our souls, “Glory to God in the Highest and on Earth...peace...and good will to all of the Divine’s beloved children!”

John Joy is the oldest son of Donald and Robbie Joy. A graduate of Asbury Theological Seminary, he was pastor of the Lexington Free Methodist Church, Christ Community, in the 1980’s. For the past 25 years John has been in private practice as psychotherapeutic counselor at New Beginnings.

Scripture: Luke 2:14 NLT

December 12, 2014

SPECIAL JOY

“Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased” (Luke 2:14 NLT).

For me, there is one word that describes Christmas: “Joy.” That word describes everything Christmas means and the way we celebrate that special day. My husband, Bob, and I loved Christmas and enjoyed making it special for our family.

But one Christmas was very special. Our daughter, Linda, was a little girl at the time, and she told me the night before that she was sick. I prayed for her, but she still felt sick the next morning. As we went down the hall to the living room, she said, “Mommy, I still feel sick. I don’t want to be sick on Christmas.”

I replied, “Honey, just ask Jesus to heal you.” She did, and He did. She was so happy she talked about it all day. Bob and I found a special joy on that day. Our precious little girl had found a new depth of faith in our Jesus on His birthday.

It was truly a day of special joy!

Lou McDonald is a retired Free Methodist minister, a widow, mother of seven children, 20 grandchildren, and 22 great-grandchildren.

GOD CAME TO OUR NEIGHBORHOOD

The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, Generous inside and out, true from start to finish (John 1:14 The Message).

In August 1996 our family moved from St. Louis, Missouri, to Győr, Hungary, as Free Methodist missionaries. First goals included enrolling the three kids in Hungarian school and starting full time Hungarian lessons for my husband and me. We quickly realized the truth of the fact that Hungarian is one of the world's most difficult languages.

We learned that St. Nicholas goes to homes and schools on December 6. Later that December a distressed neighbor informed us that our Christmas tree was up too early. "Little Jesus and the Angels" bring the fully decorated tree and all the presents on Holy Night—December 24. Her son saw our tree in the window and thought he'd missed Christmas! In those dark, winter days in December 1996, we realized even more how great a cultural change we were facing. It was discouraging and frankly, very hard.

The Christmas concert for our children's school choirs was traditionally held in the town's 15th-century cathedral. We kept our coats on (no heating) and craned our necks to see the choirs. That concert marked a turning point for my husband and me. The mystery and joy of Christmas was evident and powerful to us, even though we didn't know the words of the ancient Hungarian carols. God is with us—Emmanuel. He entered our world, entered the neighborhood, and He asks us to do the same.

Jan Coleman and her husband, Jerry, were Free Methodist missionaries in Europe until September 2013 when they moved to Wilmore. Their three grown children are scattered around the globe.

IN HOPE

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love (1Corinthians 13:13).

If you receive an e-mail from me these days, it will likely end with, "In hope, Jerry." Why do I do this? Here are my reasons:

1. I love the conclusion of 1 Corinthians 13. "And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love." So in life, I want to know all I can about these three words and the person of Jesus behind and within them. I also want others to know these words. So, many times a day I sign my e-mails—"In hope."

2. Hope fosters positivity. Hope brings light and life and joy and encouragement. If I were to die tonight, I would want someone at my funeral to say that Jerry brought the hope of Jesus to us. Followers of Jesus may face a multitude of trials and difficulties, but there is ALWAYS hope with Jesus. Even around death and destruction, questions and mysteries. In Jesus, hope reigns, hope shines, hope lures us forward toward His light. Hope might begin as a very small light at the end of a tunnel. But it is there. And hope blossoms into full light—and even life in Jesus.

3. But most of all, as we are "In Jesus," we are always "In hope." There is nothing dark enough to cloud the bright hope of Jesus. This past year has been a really tough one with a lot of transitions: moving from Budapest, changing jobs, my mother passing away, getting settled in a new community. But I continue to see the hand of God and see hope all along the way. And it keeps getting brighter day by day. We don't simply move toward it. It's because the Light came and comes toward us. Immanuel.

Jerry Coleman is an ordained elder in the Free Methodist Church and Director of International Ministries for The Francis Asbury Society. He and his wife, Jan, were missionaries in Europe for 17 years and are the parents of three adult children.

Scripture: John 3:16

December 15, 2014

MOST LAVISH GIFT

“For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

It was our first Christmas together! On Christmas Eve, we put our presents to each other under the tree and went to bed. On Christmas morning, Jama wanted me to open mine first. She had given me several wonderful items, especially a lounging jacket with satin lapels. After I received my lavish gifts, she opened her one present, a very practical, but unromantic, vacuum cleaner.

On that first Christmas Day so long ago, God gave the most lavish gift of all. He didn't have to. The fellowship among the Trinity was sufficient. But His creation of man was a disappointment because disobedience and sin had entered the world. Then God had a plan. He always has a plan! In the fullness of time, He sent His only Son, born of a virgin in Bethlehem, raised in a poor carpenter's home in a little town called Nazareth. And the Son came willingly, knowing there was pain and sorrow in His coming. A heavenly choir announced His coming, but few noticed. There was a star to help those who wanted to find Him. Few did. Some wise men, a few shepherds; that was about it.

But God, because His essence is love and His mercy and grace are lavish beyond our comprehension, sent the Christ Child anyway! And for the people of His day and for our day, we have access to His love, mercy, and grace. During this Christmas season give God lavish praise for sending His Son on that Christmas morning. It is the least we can do!

Bob Martin is a retired public school administrator and local pastor. He and his wife Jama live in Wilmore's Bethel Pointe. He'll be happy to tell you about his two children and five grandchildren.

Scripture: Luke 2:13-14, 20; Matt. 2:11a December 16, 2014

REMINDER RESPONSE

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, ...” The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God....On coming to the house, they [the Magi] saw the child with His mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped Him (Luke 2:13-14, 20; Matthew 2:11a).

I want Advent to be different this year. Beginning BEFORE Halloween and continuing through November and then through Advent right up to Christmas Day, we are subjected to sights and sounds designed to motivate us to buy, buy, buy! I confess: this just bothers me. I feel as though I'm being attacked, and the result is that I want to resist almost anything Christmas. I get pretty close to “Bah Humbug.” Only the beauty of Christmas music saves me from that.

By the afternoon of Christmas Eve, with great thankfulness that the busyness and the exposure to the Christmas marketing efforts of thousands are ending, I am prepared to enjoy a few moments of quiet worship time with the family before the chaos of gift-opening with the grandchildren. Thus, not all Christmas spirit is lost, but it could be much better.

The angels, the shepherds, and the Magi show us the way. Christ is come! Praise God! Glory to God! As taught by the Magi, let us bow and worship. Why not choose to turn occasions of marketing barrage into reminders of the blessings of His birth on earth and His birth within us? This year, I want to choose the better response.

Jama Martin is married to Bob. After some 40 years in Georgia, they have retired to Wilmore, where she has found much to do—when she's not off to Georgia or Virginia to check on the grandchildren.

OUR SPECIAL GIFT

Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen (Ephesians 3:20-21).

Christmas has always been my favorite holiday. I love the decorating, setting up the manger scene, parties, family, wrapping presents, concerts, and the hymns in church. One of the best parts of Christmas for me is finding that special gift for someone in my family and watching their face lighting up with joy.

But what Christmas really is: it is a gift to mankind from the one holy and loving God that lasts forever! Jesus was and is *our gift*. The joyful gift of Him as our Savior, Heavenly Father, Protector, Counselor and Friend. The real gift of Christmas is a life with Christ here and now and for eternity. Knowing Christ is joy and is available to everyone.

I think also of the many other gifts God has given me on earth: two daughters to raise, great loving parents, artistic talent and artistic work to help pay the bills, forgiveness for when I have sinned, companionship, and miracles, of which there have been several.

I wonder if God enjoys seeing our surprise when He gives us a gift. And isn't it like God that on His beloved Son's birthday, He gave the whole world the everlasting gift of eternal life.

Sharon Lawrence, mom to Rachel and Sarah, daughter of Carolyn and Gayle, Christian, graphic designer, blessed by God.

DIFFICULT HONOR

And Mary said: 'My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior for He has been mindful...the Mighty One has done great things for me' (Luke 1:46 NIVUK).

I am challenged by Mary's genuinely joyous, humble, response to the call that God entrusted to her. Who of us wouldn't be joyous in being considered such a key player in His plans?

However, perhaps the joy Mary experienced was not so much in her honored position but in the proof of God's faithfulness in the painful struggles that accompanied her call. The gospels don't tell us whether Mary knew of Joseph's plan to divorce her. Whether she knew in reality or by the fears that plagued her heart and mind, it's inevitable that she felt the uncertainty that loomed. The reproof of her community and family was undoubtedly difficult. But she was given the added trial of having the one with whom she was most vulnerable, the godliest man she had probably ever known, question and threaten to abandon her in the calling she had obediently accepted from God.

The uncertainty of those days must have been deeply trying and dark for Mary. Her immediate circumstances would have made it easy for her to feel victimized, bitter, abandoned by God, angry, confused, distrusting, and fearful. However, her trust rested in God. God personalized His love toward Mary by faithfully redeeming the fragments of her life.

As Christians, we hope in the assurance of a heavenly reward. However, our fears, relationships, and wondering hope are also redeemed as we look to Him. Take heart! We, too, will one day say, "My spirit REJOICES, for...He has done great things!"

Miriam Powdrill is a 2004 graduate of Asbury College. She teaches English at the Sichuan University of Arts and Science in China.

PREMEDITATED LOVE

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: 'I will send My messenger ahead of You, who will prepare Your way....' And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness. (Mark 1:1-4 NIVUK).

During this Christmas season, we remember and celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior, Christ Jesus. Although Jesus' ministry would not begin for another 30 years, God's presence was now in human form on earth. But this wasn't the beginning. God did not on the spur of the moment decide, "Oh, I think I'll send Jesus to save the world today." God was deliberate in His premeditations of what He would do. He planned for John the Baptist to go before Jesus with the message of good news. Then He took it a step further and told Isaiah about His plans to send a messenger 700 years before He was going to do it.

What does that say about God? That He's a master planner? Sometimes I think I am so used to the answer it loses its impact. God loves us. The good news about Jesus the Messiah is an outpouring of His deep, deep love for us. God's love is described as life-giving and steadfast; it is seen through His faithfulness and mercy, and nothing in all creation can separate us from it!

Have you felt that love? That is the kind of love that will bring you to your knees and with tears in your eyes and such humility in your heart that you will surrender all you are to Him. I pray that is the love you have in your hearts this season and that you will celebrate it as you celebrate the birth of our Savior who brought this love to us.

Kim Heumann works at Asbury Theological Seminary in the Department of Distributed Learning while her husband, Derik, attends the school. They plan to return to Michigan after Derik graduates, but they have greatly enjoyed living in Kentucky.

FIX YOUR EYES ON JESUS

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:2).

The Lord has been reinforcing this truth in me during this season of life. God has been reminding me over and over that when I take my eyes off Him, I can get easily distracted with the troubles of this world. I begin to focus on myself instead of on others. I begin to complain, groan, and feel hopeless.

Jesus entered this world because of love. He endured the cross and scorned its shame by conquering death. A lot of the time we end the story there. But Hebrews goes on to say, "and [He] sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." Jesus ascended into Heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He is our Advocate, our Intercessor, and our High Priest. This truth has brought me much joy.

Hebrews tells us Christ is praying for us to the Father. All that we do and say in service to God is to the Father, through the Son, and by the Spirit. The Holy Spirit draws us near, and we pray with Christ. Jesus Christ, in turn, shapes our prayers and presents them to the Father in joy and thanksgiving. The reverse is also true. The Father shows us love and grace through the Son and by the Spirit. This is how we know we are sons and daughters of God, by which we cry, "Abba, Father." We are to fix our eyes on Christ, who lifts us up to the Father by the Spirit. In this Advent season, I hope the Lord may reveal a new part of Himself to you, just as He has to me. Do you have your eyes fixed on Jesus?

Derik Heumann is an M.Div. and M.A. Biblical Studies student at Asbury Theological Seminary. He is a Conference Ministerial Candidate in the Southern Michigan Conference of the FMC.

WHAT DO I REALLY WANT?

Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart (Psalm 37:4).

"Just what I wanted, just what I *really* wanted!" were the excited squeals of my three-year-old granddaughter, Joie, one family Christmas as she opened her gifts. She uttered these same words as each gift was opened, even when it was clothes or something she may not even really have known what it was.

This memory came to mind as I read the above verse this past week. I used to think that if I lived a good life, that God would give me everything I desired. Then during a Bible study God opened my eyes to what this verse really meant. It does not say that God will give me what I desire but that He will give me the desires of my heart. God loves us so much that He wants to give us the desire to read His Word, the desire to spend time with Him in prayer, the desire to worship Him, etc. You get the idea. We only need to ask.

As Christmas is approaching this year and I hear those words, "What would you like for Christmas?" I want to remember Psalm 37:4. Now there is nothing wrong with getting and giving gifts at Christmas; that is one way we show our love for each other. But this year I pray that you will think of the gift that God would like to give you, the desire in your heart to want what HE wants for you.

Arlene Allen and her husband, Curtis, have attended WFMC since 2008. You can see them greeting people on Sunday evenings every other month. Arlene is also active in the Grandparents Who Pray, Wednesday prayer meeting, and various women's ministries of the church.

JOY IN GOD'S LOVE AND LIGHT

"Stand up and praise the Lord your God, Who is from everlasting to everlasting. Blessed be Your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise. You alone are the Lord. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship You" (Nehemiah 9:5-6).

The hand of God has made for us all that we see with just a word of His mouth. Scripture says that in just seven days He created all that there is. It is our gift to live in and is our framework of life. It broke God's heart when man rebelled against Him. This act brought sin into the world, and through sin, death.

But God's love would not let it stop there. He expressed His love by creating a way for fallen man when He sent His Son, the agent of creation (John 1:1-4), Who came into the world to create a way back to our Heavenly Father.

This greatest gift of joy, the Light shining forth from our Father to guide us home, is like the light from a lighthouse guiding a ship past the rocks back to safe harbor. We not only have followed that Light, we shine our light as we "reflect" God's light to those in danger in this world today. May we shine, lighting the way for others to find the true joy that each of us has found.

At this Christmas season, may your joy be complete as you walk with Christ, as you also give your love away.

Curtis Allen has been the pastor for three years of the First Christian Church of Millersburg (Disciples of Christ). He is a graduate of Asbury Theological Seminary. He and his wife, Arlene, are members of WFMC. They have three children and four grandchildren.

Scripture: Luke 1:44 ESV

December 23, 2014

JOY JUST HAPPENS

“For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy” (Luke 1:44 ESV).

Joy bubbles up from deep within our souls. It produces a peace-giving, thankful, healing rush of praise often expressed by a leap, a dance, a song, or the stillness of perfect contentment. The Christmas narratives are filled with joy as evidenced by a leap, spontaneous singing, and unusual behaviors such as shepherds leaving their sheep to run into town.

Joy happens when there is a promise, the provision, and the recognition of the presence of God.

Jesus promised that those who leave their families to serve Him will receive a hundredfold all that they leave behind (Mark 10:29-30). In Spain, I experienced great joy when I recognized that Jesus had fulfilled that promise when we were invited to celebrate Christmas in the home a Spanish family who had found new life in Jesus Christ. It had taken time for me to learn Spanish; it took time for this family to come to faith in Jesus Christ; it took time to develop our friendship, but Jesus was always at work. The promise was in place just as the prophecies of the promised Messiah before Jesus’ birth. The provision of God meant abundance of family, not replacement, and the presence of God that evening enveloped me with a deep sense of peace, contentment, and thankfulness.

Colleen Fitch serves as a theological education consultant in Europe with One Mission Society. She resides just north of Madrid, Spain.

Scripture: Psalm 126:2-3

December 24, 2014

FILLED WITH JOY

Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, “The Lord has done great things for them.” The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy (Psalm 126:2-3).

Christmas Eve 2012 brought clarity, peace, and overwhelming joy! We were praising His goodness in our sanctuary at WPMC at the candlelight service when we clearly heard the call to move forward with the adoption of our second child, Joshua David. Several months earlier we saw Joshua’s picture for the first time in an e-mail of waiting children in China. As we opened his picture, we knew that God was prompting us to inquire about this precious child. But there were the usual insurmountable mountains to climb—our family was without insurance at that time. We could not possibly afford a \$40,000 adoption, and Joshua was described as a special needs child with visual impairments.

The next months and years were spent on our knees in constant prayer. The Lord provided a job for Jackie with wonderful benefits for our family. Friends and family poured out their love for us in large, tangible, monetary ways, and all the while He was caring for Joshua in a mighty way at a Christ-filled and joyful home in Beijing, China. We and our son, John, traveled to bring Joshua home this past May. Joy perfectly describes Joshua’s countenance. He is happy, caring, kind, and filled with Jesus. We are blessed!

Charley and Jackie Neal live on a farm with loads of animals and a couple of grandparents. They are blessed to live near both sets of grandparents, enjoy their work, and, most of all, to be parents to two precious jewels from heaven.

WHY DOES CHRISTMAS GIVE US GREAT JOY?

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 (John 1:14 NIVUK).

Christmas is a focal point of the seasonal cycle of celebrations of the Christian year. The celebration brings us hope and joy for now, for the future, and for the life after death. We celebrate Christmas with great joy because Christ was born for us. It is one of several ways by which God reveals Himself to us and so that we might know Him and participate in Christ's work with joy and peace and confidence.

The triune God has, in grace, created us male and female in His image that we might find our true being in intimate communion with Him and with one another. After the fall, human beings went astray, coming under the natural law of death and continuing in corruption. Christ was born and died on the cross for our sins. He rose again and became our great High Priest. The dual nature of divinity and humanity of Christ makes Him understandable and approachable. Through the union of the immortal Son of God with our human nature, we are not only capable of escaping from the law of death, we can be clothed with incorruption in the promise of the resurrection. Moreover, Christ takes our prayers as His prayers and intercedes for us in front of God while we are in the world. Even though we do not know what we ought to pray for, the Spirit intercedes for us through wordless groans. We can live a life of communion with God through the gift of Jesus Christ in the Spirit. That is why Christmas matters and why we celebrate it with great joy.

Matthew Liang is an international student attending Asbury Theological Seminary. He and his wife, Susan, and their daughters, Jenny and Christy, have attended WFMC since 2013.



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Unless otherwise noted, scripture quotations are from the NIV
Abbreviation WFMC = Wilmore Free Methodist Church