



BE NOT AFRAID

2011 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

WHILE SHEPHERDS WATCHED THEIR FLOCKS

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

“Fear not!” said he; for mighty dread
Had seized their troubled mind,
“Glad tidings of great joy I bring,
To you and all mankind.”

Thus spake the seraph; and forthwith
Appeared a shining throng
Of angels praising God on high,
Who thus addressed their song:

“All glory be to God on high,
And to the earth be peace:
Good will henceforth from heaven to men,
Begin and never cease!”



Editor: Martha Evans Sparks

Art: Angel Michael. 13th Century Byzantine icon from Saint Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai

Unless otherwise noted, scripture quotations are from the NIV.

Abbreviation WFMC = Wilmore Free Methodist Church

Text by Tate and Brady

WILMORE FREE METHODIST CHURCH

...CHRIST'S PRESENCE IN THE WORLD

NEVER ALONE

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows (James 1:17).

As I was growing up I remember deer hunting with my dad in Northern Michigan. He would make sure I was dressed warm enough and off we would go into the woods well before sunrise. Flashlights in hand, we would walk ever so quietly in the freezing darkness to our predetermined spots. I would hunker down at the base of a tree (hunker - I believe this is a hunting word that means trying to stay warm) or fence post and stare into the darkness of the forest. The wind wrestling the trees, acorns falling into the leaves, and the sound of my heart beating were not for the faint. Throw in the moving shadows of the forest and this twelve year old was ready to run. The only thing that kept me from abandoning my post was that I knew that my dad wasn't far away and that even in the darkness he could find me. Well, the sun would break the darkness into morning and chase the shadows away and even the noises of the night would fade with the light.

I'm older now, and my fears are different, but it still helps to know my Father isn't far off and He knows where I am, even in the darkness.

John 1:9 The one who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.

Pastor Ron Balzer and his wife Tammy have three children, daughter Corey (husband Ricky), son Daniel, and daughter Abbie and a granddaughter Hayleigh-Ann. He is superintendent of the New South Conference of the Free Methodist Church.

WHAT SHALL I DO WITH THE BABY?

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:18 ESV).

Only Matthew reports the betrothal challenge Joseph faced. Matthew's "genealogy of Jesus" in verse 16 concludes: ". . . and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ."

Joseph was a descendant in the line of David. "Mary who was the mother of Jesus," extends the line of women with scandalous reputations: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the "wife of Uriah," Bathsheba. Of all the mothers in Jesus' line, only these are listed, verifying God never excludes or shames anyone.

When Joseph learned that Mary was "with child," and had to decide what to do, he saw no way to save their plans. But God had a better idea and in a dream an angel said,

"Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." . . . And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus. (Matthew 1:20-21, 24-25. ESV).

Donald Joy often volunteers as Cindy Peterson's VBS assistant working with 2 and 3 year olds, and, with wife Robbie, hosts four great grandchildren 4 days a week.

MY CHRISTMAS ANGEL

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 (Luke 2:10-11 KJV).

This Advent my thoughts go back sixty-three years to my first real Christmas. Robert Fulghum may have tried to convince us that all we need to know we learn in kindergarten. For me, it began when I entered fifth grade.

That's the year I had my Christmas angel, Mrs. Carmen North. Her announcement to me was that I was chosen to play the part of someone called Mary in "The Christmas Story." How confusing! Weren't there lots of Christmas stories? Just who was this Mary that Mrs. North spoke of with such awe?

When I handed the slip of paper to my mother informing her that I was to be Mary in "The Christmas Story" and would she please furnish me with an appropriate costume, I was sure that she would be upset especially about the costume part. But, instead, she seemed pleased. In just a few minutes she began to hum as she pulled fabric from her sewing cabinet. My confusion grew. My puzzlement continued until the next morning when the teacher began the day as was her custom by reading from the Bible. As she opened the Bible she said, "Today, I am reading to you, The Christmas Story."

As I listened, the awe and wonder I had sensed in my teacher and my mother began to grow in me. The angel's announcement became real to me the following year when Jesus became my Savior.

Marcia Burgess chose to follow the example of her Christmas angel by sharing the message of "The Christmas Story" in classrooms in Michigan, Indiana, and Kentucky.

DREAMS OF FAITH

Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce [Mary] quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream...” (Matthew 1:19-20 ESV).

The dream state is one of the few remaining mystical experiences that is still appreciated in our technocratic culture. Dreams are the evidence of intoxicating sleep. Idealism captivates the faith of youth in impassioned vision. Yet our pragmatism understands that life lived solely in the clouds with no boots on the ground is simply daydreaming.

People truly depend upon us to produce results for them. Dreams can joyfully propel us towards these goals. Anxiety can also sabotage us; a treadmill from which there is no escaping the nightmare. Challenges regularly beset our hearts, but have our minds been disciplined to faithfully meet them?

Luke tells us that Joseph did not seek out Mary’s “found favor” (Luke 1:30, ESV). He met this challenge cast upon him with a strong mind disciplined in Torah wisdom. He was no idealistic dreamer. However, it was during his mentally unfettered dream state that the Lord came to Joseph, who faithfully obeyed.

Joseph’s disciplined mind enabled him to receive and retain God’s peculiar grace cast into his heart. In faith he navigated this challenge, and our Prince of Peace was born into his nightmare. Peace, as the removal of our obstacles, is but a daydream. Their successful navigation is peace. Being disciplined in the Word of God will enable us to receive and retain grace from the Prince of Peace for obedient faith.

William Daniel says he is “a blessed husband and father of three dreamy kids from Georgia.” He is currently pursuing the Master of Divinity at Asbury Theological Seminary for the naval chaplaincy.

GOD’S PRESENCE BRINGS PEACE

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (John 14: 27).

As Jesus slept in his manger, he was surrounded by a diverse group of people gathered for the divine event of his birth. I am deeply moved as I remember countless other followers who worshipped Jesus, those with names like Wycliffe, Luther, Tyndale, Calvin, and Wesley.

It has always been God’s presence that has held His people together, both spiritually and in faith. At the end of his life, Jesus promised God’s presence to the disciples when He spoke of His departure, assuring them that He would never abandon them but would send the Holy Spirit, the Counselor, who would teach them all things and would remind them of everything He had said to them.

Jesus’ birth reminds us that God has promised never to forsake or leave us. We need not be afraid. Despite whatever might happen in history, He will offer comfort and hope that there is meaning in life and that He is in control.

As Christians, created in the divine image and likeness, we intuitively know that our role in life must be active, not passive, as we help to fulfill God’s purposes. Loving our neighbor, helping the poor, praying for others...these are all essential activities. How blessed we are!

Debbie Eggum has lived in Vero Beach, FL, six-plus months a year for the past 15 years. She has been active in Older Adult Ministry at First Presbyterian Church. She looks forward to returning to WFMC in late April 2012.

FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT

“The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.” (John 1:9).

One of my favorite things about Christmastime is Christmas lights. I have always enjoyed going for a drive to view how different homes light up the neighborhood and countryside. One of my favorite Christmas traditions is the candlelight Christmas Eve service. The lighting and passing of the flame is frequently done while singing *Silent Night*.

As a young child I remember being afraid of the dark, and even today there are nights where I anxiously await the dispelling of the darkness by the breaking forth of light. It is interesting that throughout Scripture light and life seem to go hand in hand, and conversely, darkness is associated with fear, evil, and death. Light drives back darkness—as the flame passes from one person to another, the room fills with light. The in-breaking of the Kingdom of God through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Word become flesh, is the reality of what we symbolically celebrate by passing the flame during the candlelight service.

Advent literally means “coming” or “arrival,” and refers to the coming of Jesus Christ, the true light, to earth. As we celebrate the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, let us examine ourselves and surrender any dark places of fear or evil in our lives to Jesus, the true light who overcomes all darkness. And let us remember that not only have we received the light of Christ, but we carry and spread it wherever we go.

Andy Bentz is a second year M.DIV. student at Asbury Theological Seminary, and a Conference Ministerial Candidate in the Southern Michigan Conference of the FMC. He and his wife Ashley are from Mason, Michigan.

LORD OF THE UNIVERSE SEES EVEN ME

My help comes from the LORD, Who made heaven and earth (Psalm 121:2 NASB).

It had been snowing that Saturday afternoon. Later in the evening Dolly and I were on our way home from an out-of-town errand. We drove on an unfamiliar street, in a sparsely populated area of town, not realizing that what looked like snow blowing onto the road from a shoulder was actually a ditch filled with snow. Then our right front wheel slipped down into the ditch. It was late. It was cold...and we were stuck.

We believed that our best chance to get the car back up on the road was for one of us to push the car while the other attempted to drive it out. We spent the next hour or two trying to get the car out, but our best efforts only took us deeper. About midnight we decided that we really must get into a more lighted, populated area of town, but we'd try one last time. If it didn't work, we'd lock up the car, leave it for later, and walk home.

Dolly got behind the wheel and started the car. I was turning around to go push the car for this last effort, when she called to me that I could stop pushing now, the car was out. I hadn't reached the car to push it by the time she drove it out, but she had felt the push that took the car up and out of the ditch and onto solid ground once again.

The incarnate Christ was born to save the world. His salvation is personally applied in our need.

Karen Koehn, mother of three, has worked in higher education for the past 20 years. She grew up in a parsonage, and served as pastor's wife for several years. Her interests include spiritual formation, reading mysteries, and remodeling.

THE JOY OF THE LORD

"Behold, God is my salvation, I will trust and not be afraid; For the Lord God is my strength and my song, And He has become my salvation." Therefore you will joyously draw water from the springs of salvation (Isaiah 12:2-3 NAS).

"Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength" (Nehemiah 8:10b NAS).

"The Joy of the Lord is my strength." This song repeated over and over in my mind as I began my experimental treatments for stage four cancer. I was never frightened, sad or depressed wondering "Why me?" In His graciousness, Christ provided me with the opportunity to truly receive His love.

Many hours I enjoyed my fellowship with Jesus as I lay in the MRI and CT scan machines. I received great strength and blessings as Jesus became more real to me. I literally fell in love with Him.

I love to tell others about His beauty and love. To invite them to open their hearts to the tender love He has for all. To love Jesus is to have joy and strength.

The prayers of our church carried me through and continue to minister to me.

The angel announced at Christ's birth, "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great JOY!" (My emphasis added.) During this season take time to fall in LOVE with Jesus, the most precious friend you could ever have.

Emily Fitch graduated from Asbury University with an art degree. After teaching art briefly, she decided having adventures with her four children was more fun. "I could still paint, write children's stories and poetry, sculpt, and grow orchids."

NO FEAR IN LOVE

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear....The man who fears is not made perfect in love (1John 4:18).

It seems there are two driving forces in life: Fear and love - and they just cannot exist in harmony.

Fear drives dysfunction of our ego. We tend to hide behind or identify with illnesses, self-pity, gangs, political groups, material things, etc., to protect the ego, which prevents us from driving toward the Light. Being aware of our fears can redirect or turn this dysfunction into beneficial energy and free us.

As our verse for today says, "But perfect Love drives out fear...."

How do we find this perfect Love? Meditating on what we know to be true, that God IS Love (1 John 4:16). God's love and grace are available. During this time of Advent and then throughout our days, let us be aware of our fears and intend to be "made perfect in love."

Lorraine Hinerman lives in Wilmore, graduated from Asbury University and is the Lead Technologist for a group of neurologists in Lexington. She currently serves as Sunday School Secretary for WFMC.

Scripture: John 1:14

December 22, 2011

GOD'S VISIBLE PRESENCE

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth (John 1:14 NRSV).

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” With the birth of Jesus our whole world changed as the invisible God became visible and took on flesh. He was fully God and fully human being born into the world like any other person. I am just beginning to understand what Christ's birth, life, death, and resurrection mean. Do we truly grasp the significance of Christ's existence on earth and what it implies for us today? We have a savior who understands us completely because He became one of us. Our God is not a distant God who has no comprehension of what it means to be a human. Rather we have a God who has lived through pain and heartache as well as joy and happiness.

Where is the visible presence of an invisible God now that Christ is not here? It is inside of us. We have Christ's life and we are His likeness, Christ's body, in this world. I live and minister in Mexico and I long to bring Christ to those around me. The only way they are going to see Christ is if they see Him living in me. The Christian life isn't about trying to be like Christ, and striving to do good works, instead it is about letting Christ's spirit dwell and work in us. Everything else flows out of that life in us and is a natural result of intimacy with God. This Christmas, what are we going to give others? Why don't we give them the visible presence of an invisible God? Why don't we give them Jesus?

Jennifer Rebecca Reynolds grew up in Wilmore. Now she is a missionary with GO InterNational in Central Mexico. She and her husband Josh are planting a church in the city of León. Jennifer is also involved in other ministries including teaching ballet to underprivileged children.

Scripture: 1 John 4:9-10, 18

December 3, 2011

GIVE FEARS TO JESUS

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him....There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The man who fears is not made perfect in love (1 John 4:9, 18 NRSV).

Jesus has tenderly been dealing with fear in my heart over the past few months. The joy that comes with being a mommy to my sweet toddler boy and baby girl is indescribable, but fears about their physical safety, their future choices, etc., repeatedly entered my mind. The Holy Spirit convicted me and reminded me that these fears are not of the Lord. Jesus came out of love for me, love for my babies, love for us all, and "there is no fear in love...perfect love drives out fear." Fearing is not trusting Him and His provision for our lives. What is it that you fear? Being alone? The future? Financial difficulties? Join me this Advent Season in giving these fears to Jesus. Oh how He loves us and wants us to trust Him. Give Him the big things and the little things, trust Him with today and tomorrow. Many have heard the quote by Jeannine Brabon, missionary to Colombia: "Security is not the absence of danger, but the presence of Jesus." This resonates with us because we long for security, peace, and joy that transcends circumstances. Jesus offers that to us, His beloved, if we enter into His presence and accept His perfect gift of love for each moment in our lives. As we reflect on His birthday and His life of sacrificial love, let's celebrate that we have nothing to fear when we entrust our lives to Jesus!

Jenny Hundley says she is blessed to be mommy to Caleb (2 ½ years) and Abby (6 months), and wife to Jon, “my wonderful husband of 17 years.” They met and married as students at Asbury University and moved back to Wilmore two years ago.

WARM CHRISTMAS

Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ (Colossians 2:16-17).

When my Spanish teacher learned from a friend of hers that Christmas occurred during the summer for South and Central America, she was amazed! She, like many other Americans, couldn't imagine Christmas without snow. Even though half the country doesn't even get snow, the idea of a rosy warm fire on a cold, snowy night is as much a part of our Christmas culture as Santa Claus, gaudy Christmas lights and cheery sing-along-songs. Of course, there is nothing wrong with these things. They are part of our culture and heritage, and they are the links to many warm, fond memories. But we cannot allow these things, as special as they are, to cloud the real reason we are celebrating. We are celebrating the coming of a Savior, the very One who is pivotal to what we live for! We must remember this, for it is what sets us apart from a corrupted world that sees December 25th as a marketer's holiday. This year, even as we stay glamorously busy with the holidays, let us not forget what the holiday hustle is all about. After all, even unbelievers can have the "holiday spirit." But our Spirit should be One who lasts the entire year.

Sarah Redmon turned 17 in October. She is a junior at West Jessamine High School. She spends most of her time either doing homework or horseback riding. She's been attending WFMC with her family since they moved to Wilmore eleven years ago.

SIMPLE OBEDIENCE REPLACES FEAR

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife (Matthew 1:24).

In Matthew's contribution to the Christmas story he offers the account of how an angel appeared to Joseph and told him "...don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife..." Joseph had sufficient reason not to consummate his relationship with his future bride; she was already pregnant and he had no desire to cause her disgrace. The angel went on to inform Joseph that the Child had actually been conceived by the Holy Spirit and was the One for whom the world was waiting. He now certainly had reason to fear. How could he be the earthly father to the Son of God? How could he raise Him to accomplish all that God had ordained? The challenge that Joseph faced was almost incomprehensible.

Yet Joseph was a righteous man and he knew the God of Isaiah 41, who had told him not to fear and had promised He would strengthen, help, and uphold him with His "righteous right hand." Since Joseph knew that his instruction had come from an angel of his God, he did not hesitate; he replaced his fear with obedience. As soon as he awoke from the dream "...he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him." He did not dwell on his fear nor did he consider other options; he simply did as he was directed. There was no reluctance...no doubt...he simply obeyed.

What God desires of us is simple obedience. Not obedience born of fear or laden with hesitancy, but obedience secured in a faith that trusts in the sovereign God. May the supremacy of God so flood your heart this Christmas that obedience becomes simple and all your fear replaced, just as it was for Joseph.

Paul Hamann is a life-long resident of Wilmore. He is married to Sue. They have three married children, one granddaughter. Paul is in his 37th year as an educator in the Jessamine County Schools.

GIFTS OF PRESENCE

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in strips of cloth and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn (Luke 2:6-7).

It is said that we celebrate Christmas with gift giving based upon the account found in Matthew of the visit of the Magi and their gifts to Jesus of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Matthew is the only gospel that mentions the visit of the Magi. Matthew also fails to mention that Jesus was born in a stable and laid in a manger; that account is found in Luke. Luke tells us that Jesus was visited not by Magi but by shepherds and He was born in a stable. It's funny that we have chosen to base our Christmas traditions on Matthew and not on Luke. We spend lots of thought on what we might give to our loved ones on Christmas day because the Magi did the same for Jesus.

What would happen if we based our Christmas traditions on Luke's gospel too? Shepherds visited Jesus. What do we do to remember them? They had no gifts to bring to Jesus for they were poor. Do our Christmas celebrations involve those to whom belong the kingdom of God? What if our Christmas preparations involved not only thoughts of blessing our loved ones but also thoughts of blessing the lowly? And what if instead of gifts we gave our presence among them just as Jesus gave His presence to shepherds?

Josh Reynolds and his wife Jennifer are missionaries to Mexico with GO InterNational where they are church planting and teaching Bible classes.

TRUSTING FOR THE FUTURE

But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:20 NKJV).

Have you ever been afraid? In many cases, fear is actually palpable.

When I was a young boy growing up on a farm, I decided to raise a steer as a 4-H project. I spent weeks feeding, watering and attempting to train this irritable animal that I named "J.R. Ewing" because of his nasty disposition. One day, while attempting to train him, the steer sensed my fear, pawed the ground and chased me out of his pen. As I reached the fence and hastily climbed to the top, J.R. hit me in the backside and sent me sailing over the wire. After hitting the ground, I ran home to a sympathetic father who loaded a rifle...and promptly shot J.R. His demise led to our family's freezer being filled with meat for an entire season.

The fear I felt that day was much like Joseph's as he learned about his betrothed wife's pregnancy. Sensing his anxiety, the angel's first words were, "do not be afraid." This message is similar to the angel's message to Mary in Luke 1:30. The commands given to this loving couple apply to our lives as well.

Fear is a human emotion but as Christians, we should not dwell on our circumstances but trust in God's sovereign control over our daily lives. When the trials of life come, trusting in His word is the only way to bring true peace and joy. In this Advent season, focus on His goodness and trust Christ with your future. After all, He has your best interests in mind.

Jay McCants lives in Bagdad, KY with his wife, Heather, and their two children, Olivia and Isaac. Jay and Heather met while attending Asbury University and have been married for 20 years.

ON BEING NOT AFRAID

...[T]hey did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death (Rev. 12:11b).

This verse was spoken of followers of Christ who overcome the Accuser. I would say they proved to *be not afraid*. Sometimes we are not afraid because of a sense of God's protection. But sometimes we may feel afraid, yet *be not afraid*.

I am reading some Free Methodist history of our first missionaries to Africa. So many died of "African Fever." I have read of the high percentage of Africa missionaries who died. But it stood out so sharply to me that *ours* were among those who did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. They did not allow themselves to be afraid.

Our Togo leader just told me about a pastor colleague who died in an accident. He testified how he was very distraught, saying to the Lord, "God, you can do anything. This was your servant. Why couldn't you save him?" He told how he asked the church to pray for him; he needed God's help dealing with this. Here was a different risk than sickness, one that led grievously to loss. The follow up for me personally was coming home to learn of a horrible road accident on a highway I travel. My heart sank on hearing of it. My wife travels that road. I travel that road. That could have been one of us. How do I deal with that? Actually, I do fear. I take every precaution. But it challenges me as a contemporary application of not loving life so much as to shrink from death. By grace I have to *be not afraid*.

Mike Reynen, with wife Vickie and son Kyle, live in Nairobi, Kenya. He serves as Africa Area Director for Free Methodist World Missions.

WHAT ARE WE TO BE?

"Don't be afraid; just believe" (Mark 5: 36b).

We all know what it is to be afraid. Fear can serve us well by warning us of danger and prompting us to flee or fight. But fear can also dampen the human spirit and diminish the power of God in our lives. Christ knows this and perhaps this is why He or His messengers so often greet us time and again with "Be not afraid." There seems to be an implicit question in these words: "What are we to *be* if we are not to be afraid?" As Christ makes the statement "Be not afraid" He often follows through and answers this question with commands such as: "have faith in Him," "believe in Him," or "trust Him." He sometimes intentionally confronts us with opportunities to exercise our faith and place our trust in Him. He wants us to know that He is in the thick of things with us regardless of our circumstances, or maybe *especially* because of our circumstances. He wants us to know that He has drawn near – that He is involved in the details of our lives – the things that may cause us to be afraid. He is in control, and all that really matters is that we trust Him.

When Jesus says He will deliver you, that He will keep you safe, He means it. Satan is powerless against the protection of Christ. No matter how disconsolate, perplexed, or fearful we may be, God is sufficient. God has proven Himself as a faithful father. Now it falls to us to be trusting children. During this Advent, hear the comforting words of Christ Jesus: "Be not afraid" – words we all need to hear, at one time or another. "*The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged*" (Deut.31:8).

Royce Bourne is an architect and is currently working with the WFMC Capital Planning Team. He and his wife, Susie, live in Lexington. They have worshiped at WFMC for the past year.

LET ME DECREASE

“Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight” (Matthew 3:3b ESV).

The words from the text above are quoted from Isaiah 40:3 in the three Synoptic Gospels. Being called of God to fulfill this special role, John the Baptist’s central passion in life was to make preparation for “the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” His legacy is inextricably linked to the advent of Christ. We find no self-made prophet who came touting his own agenda. No, John’s life was a life centered on another, and he saw true success being his own “decrease” for the sake of the “increase” of Christ (John 3:30).

It’s easy for us to affirm with our mouths the same ethic as John as we sit on the other side of two thousand years of church history. But for this Advent season, let’s remember this as we read the Gospel accounts: Christ’s coming in the flesh is as effectual and important for us personally as it was for John the Baptist. Enter the text. Remember that, while John had a unique role to fulfill, we are called with him to decrease in our own self-interest, to take up our cross, and follow Christ. Let’s ask ourselves as we read, not only John the Baptist’s, but every encounter with Jesus, “Is my life one that is bound with Jesus? Does my life’s work reflect His interests? And when my life is spoken of long after I’m gone, can it be described independently of Jesus and his life?” If so, we need to personalize Christ’s Advent into every part of us. Let’s “prepare him room” to increase.

Josh Ratliff is a student at Asbury Seminary, where he is completing his M. A. in Biblical Studies. He and his wife, Valerie, have one daughter, Macie Jane, born October 15, 2011.

IS THERE ROOM IN MY HEART?

And she brought forth her first-born son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn (Luke 2:7 KJV).

What a day!! What happened to the Middle Eastern hospitality? How come Mary and Joseph have no family or friends to host them? Nobody in this little town has any kind of mercy for a pregnant lady coming from a long journey?!!

More than two thousand years later, still no room. No room for Jesus in Bethlehem. No room for Jesus' followers in Iraq, their churches are burnt and they are forced to leave as refugees. No room for the child of Bethlehem in Egypt, the place where Jesus found room and lived for 2 years, drank from the Nile and ate like an Egyptian. His first few words were Coptic (before He spoke Hebrew or Aramaic). Yet there is no room for the Cross in Egypt. Copts (Christian Egyptians) are persecuted, forced to leave in some places, or their churches are leveled to the ground or burnt because the scene of the cross aggravates Jesus haters. No room.

In the Middle East and North Africa, there is no room. How about Asia, Europe and sub-Saharan Africa? Is there any room? Is there room for the Jewish carpenter in Latin America? In North America, in the land of the free, is there room for the Jewish baby with obvious middle-eastern features?

My three-year-old son was asking who is this old guy with a white beard and red clothes who has lots of room? I could not tell him the reason for the season since there was no room.

Will there be a room available in 2012?

Sameh Lamiy, MD, FACC, FHRS, is a heart rhythm specialist at Saint Joseph hospital, Lexington. He and his wife, Jaclyn, a veterinarian, are natives of Egypt. They have attended WFMC since they and their three children moved to Lexington in 2010.

Scripture: Luke 1:26-38

December 8, 2011

GOD IS WITH US

The angel went to her and said, “The Lord is with you....Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God” (Luke 1:28, 30).

During the 11-hour drive home for the holidays we took turns serving as co-pilot. During my “shift” it was my job to keep Mom awake while Dad and my siblings slept in the back seats of the van. When it suddenly began to snow and cars started sliding off the road in every direction I did the only thing a 9 year-old co-pilot could do: I began to pray! I prayed throughout the remainder of the trip, a trip that extended over two days as we experienced engine troubles and sub-zero temperatures. That trip has been etched in my memory, not so much for the adventure of it, but instead for the realization that God was with us! I remember telling my mom, “Don’t worry, God is with us and He will protect us.”

Now I’m grown up and married to Ricardo. Our kids, Juliana and Jonathan, demonstrated the same faith in response to the 8.8 earthquake that struck Chile in February 2010. Several times in the following days and weeks they declared, “God is always with us; Fear NOT!”

The news the angel gave Mary could have set off a blizzard of emotions or at least a measurable tremble on her internal Richter scale. Yet, perhaps thanks to his assurance that, “The Lord is with you....Do not be afraid,” she was able to respond, “I am the Lord’s servant....May it be to me as you have said” (v. 38).

Lord, each time we find ourselves in a dangerous, new, or uncertain situation, help us to remember that when You are with us, we have absolutely nothing to fear. Thanks for always being “God with us!”

Beth Gómez, is a member of WFMC. She and Ricardo are Free Methodist Missionaries to Latin America, and have lived with their children in Santiago, Chile since 2007.

Scripture: John 1:14

December 17, 2011

WATCHING FOR HIS COMING

The Word became flesh and lived for a while 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).

I hiked up the mountain to the upper meadow at Rolling J Ranch, to a choice lookout point to watch for the arrival of Columbia II from its voyage in space. It was November 14, 1981. Columbia arrived right on schedule for a perfect landing at Edwards Air Force Base, but I didn’t see it. I heard the double sonic boom, followed by a low rumble, but I never saw the spacecraft.

I was watching, anticipating—but I missed it.

For centuries, people looked for the coming of the promised Messiah, and “in the fullness of time” He came (Galatians 4:4), not a minute too early, not a minute late. Sadly, only a few recognized Him as the one sent from God.

He grew as any other child, through all the stages of childhood and youth and young manhood, and no one suspected the carpenter’s son was also the Son of God—until the day He came to John to be baptized.

“Behold the lamb of God!” said John. “This is the one I meant. This is the Son of God!” (John 1:29, 30, 34).

For three years, Jesus taught, healed and performed miracles designed to convince the most determined skeptic. Multitudes came and “saw,” but only a few recognized Him.

No one knows the day or the hour of His second Advent, but He will be right on schedule. Let us be watching, with eyes to recognize Him when He comes.

Shirley McMillan is a native of Indiana, lives in Wilmore and has been a member of WFMC for twelve years. She leads a writers group at the Community Center at Wesley Village in Wilmore.

HOPE FULFILLED

The Lord said to Abram, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:2-3 NRSV).

Often our feeble imaginations put limits on what we think God desires to do. These limits often prevent us from perceiving God's work and participating in it. Imagine Sarah, Abram's wife, rejecting God's promise of a child. Or Mary? Their willingness to expand their imaginations allowed God to bring about the salvation of the world. Let us expand our imaginations and perceive the plans of God.

This body young, unknown to man, was met by Godly crier;
Disclosed to me the holy plan conceived in God's desire.
I said, I said, "Lord, here am I, a servant of Your will.
And through my Child, the hungry cry for mercy soon fulfill."

Creation groans in agony, to sin a mistress bound,
Begets decay, futility; and yet, a hope is found.
It groans, it groans with labor pains. This age of death shall pass
when Christ descends in time ordained, and horns of triumph blast.

O Promised Child! Begotten One! Our hope fulfilled at last!
Incarnate God and hallowed Son bears mercy unsurpassed.

Sean Allen is originally from central Illinois. He and his wife, Heather, moved to Wilmore in 2010. He attends Asbury Theological Seminary.

HOW WILL WE RESPOND?

Magi from the east...asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?"...When King Herod heard this he was disturbed"(Matthew 2:2, 3).

Matthew 2 contains the different responses of the Magi and King Herod to the news of Jesus' birth. According to Matthew's account, the Magi and Herod state they want to *worship* the child (2:1, 8). Yet, while the Magi do *worship* Jesus, *presenting* him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh (2:11), Herod does not, plotting death instead (2:16). The Magi respond positively, but Herod responds negatively.

Matthew periodically recalls this episode when he documents how people were *presented* to Jesus and how people *worshiped* Him throughout His ministry (Matthew uses the same verbs). By design, these recollections also testify to the nature of Jesus' Messiahship. The sick and demon possessed were *presented* to Jesus for healing (4:23-25; 8:16; 9:2, 32; 12:22; 14:35). Children were *presented* to Jesus (19:13-15), showing that the Kingdom of God benefits the least and most vulnerable in society. Lepers, public officials, and Canaanites *worshiped* Jesus in their desire for healing (8:2; 9:18; 15:25). Jesus' disciples *worshiped* Him after He walked on the water (14:22-36). Ultimately, Matthew comes full circle, reiterating the message of chapter 2. According to Matthew 28:17, upon seeing Jesus after His resurrection, "[The disciples] *worshiped* him, but some doubted." Jesus' messiahship confronts everyone with a choice- to believe Him or reject Him, to respond positively or negatively.

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Scripture: 1 John 3:8b

December 10, 2011

STRENGTH IN WEAKNESS

The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work (1 John 3:8b).

As Wesleyans we sometimes tend to neglect the sovereignty of God. Our theological emphasis has been on grace, love and free will. This is usually a good idea but sometimes I wonder if it hasn't been taken too far. It is usually noticeable when we deal with things that scare us or when a grave injustice has occurred. Deep down we wonder if God has what it takes to deal with evil. Could it be that we wonder whether God is truly on the throne or not? Reality has a way of displacing theology.

This could explain why we struggle with how a little baby could make us feel safe. How could he? We like cute baby Jesus when we *feel* safe and in control, but we *need* the Almighty version when evil once again interrupts our lives. Even at Christmas time we know all too well that this world is a place of tainted beauty and that we need someone to save us. We need power.

Intriguingly, a helpless baby was God's plan to show us that He *is* the Almighty but also the Gentle one. Only by the incarnation do we understand that power is found in human weakness and Divine providence. We should fear God so we know we are not Him, but we aren't the ones who should be afraid. We are the ones whom He loves and His love, though fierce, is not for our destruction but for the destruction of the Defeated One.

Andreas Kjernald, 37, holds the M.Div. degree from Wesley Biblical Seminary. He is a UMC pastor in Sweden and an associate member of WFMC. He is married to Laurie. They have two children, Samuel and David.

Scripture: Luke 1:30

December 15, 2011

TRUSTING GOD IN ALL THINGS

But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God" (Luke 1:30).

"Be not afraid." In these days, especially recently, those words might bring to mind the thought that we shouldn't be afraid when times are bad economically. While this is true, God does indeed have everything under control, we also need to see that this phrase applies to everything. "Be not afraid" when things take an economical downturn. "Be not afraid" when a family member is told they have cancer or a chronic disease. "Be not afraid" when you hear of a catastrophe happening near loved ones. In all these things, we can't help the situations mentioned by worrying, but through prayer and petition, trusting that God's plan will be perfectly played out.

But we also need to "Be not afraid" when we are called to wholeheartedly trust God's leading in our lives, like Mary was. Though His directions are sometimes relatively simple and "easy" to follow as He gives them to us, they may not make sense, or may injure our pride, such as if He tells us to "apologize to that person", or "humble yourself in this matter – you may think you're right, but I know what's best". His "little" instructions may not make sense, or seem inconsequential, but if we can learn to not be afraid in trusting Him in everything, His plan will be shown as perfect to us, and like Mary, we can trust that we have found favor in God's eyes.

Hannah Long is home schooled and a senior in high school. She enjoys riding horses, reading, and playing violin in the university orchestra. She, her parents, and her four siblings have been attending WFMC for 4 years.

Scripture: John 15:13

December 14, 2011

FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD

Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends (John 15:13 (KJV)).

Several years ago my father underwent surgery to remove his colon after years of suffering with ulcerative colitis. Due to an oversight in recovery he awoke from the anesthetic under no pain medicine. We watched helplessly as he lay there writhing in agony. With tears streaming down all of our cheeks I overheard my grandfather say in a verbal expression of his inner agony, “I’d trade him places without blinking.” I gave that statement a lot of thought, and wondered if I could’ve said the same. Perhaps I could have steeled myself and have come to the place where I would willingly have suffered for my father, but could I have done it “without blinking”? The conclusion to which I was driven was that I didn’t love my father like his father loved him.

Now I am myself a father of three children and can much better understand my grandfather’s perspective. When they fall down so do I; when they scrape their knees, bruise their shins, or cut their fingers I feel it too. I would cry a hundred tears if it could spare them one, and, were it needful, I’d lay down my life for them “without blinking.”

Isn’t it marvelous to see in scripture with what great love our heavenly Father has loved us! His thoughts were for our good even before we were fashioned in our mothers’ wombs, and He had made plans for our redemption before we had drawn our first breath. As we give thought this Christmas season to the babe in the manger, let us also reflect upon what a consummate expression of love that Child was and for what end He came into the world, to “lay down His life for His friends.”

Chadwick Spencer is the father of three children, Gabriel, Jacob, and Ellie, and is the husband of “a beautiful wife, Sarah.”

Scripture: Luke 2:39-40

December 11, 2011

PARENTING PROBLEMS

When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him (Luke 2:39-40).

In keeping with this year’s theme, “Be Not Afraid,” I can’t help but reverently chuckle at the pressures that Mary and Joseph had to feel during Christ’s ‘formative’ years on earth.

As parents of two young children, Jill and I constantly pray for them—their health, their development, and against the inevitability of sin in their lives. We often think of our worst fears as parents: disease, predators, or losing sight of them in a store.

It is simple enough to take the above passage for granted. Mary and Joseph had been assured that God the Father’s very Hand was upon the child, and that they were parenting the very Savior of the world. Despite throngs of angels and prophetic guarantees, I’m sure they had the same fears we share today.

But don’t we, as Christ’s followers, have the same assurance? Hasn’t the Father made clear throughout Scripture that His Hand shall be just as prevalent in us and in the lives of our children? As believers of God’s Holy Word, we have affirmation, even a mandate, to follow the Spirit’s leading without fear. Through this Advent season, let us still our hearts and worship the Christ Child. Let us be thankful for the gift of His grace to each of us, and stand in confidence that the Lord has, for all time, guaranteed us salvation by obedience—the cornerstone of a life without fear.

Paul Swaim has been married to Jill for 5 ½ years. They have two sons, Walker Jennings and Coleman Harbor. Paul grew up as a member of WFMC. He and Jill moved back to Jessamine County in 2008, and have attended WFMC since January 2009.

FIND REST IN THEE

“Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed” (Luke 10:41-42a).

Many Christmas songs, such as “It Came upon a Midnight Clear,” “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” “Away in a Manger,” and “Silent Night,” use beautiful melodies and lyrics to focus on the stillness, quietness, and restfulness of the night on which Jesus our Savior was born. These songs sooth our spirits and quiet our souls, but we do not have to wait for them to play on the radio to experience the peace that they portray. Charles Wesley wrote an Advent hymn entitled “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus” which pleads, “Come, Thou long-expected Jesus, born to set thy people free; from our fears and sins release us, Let us find our rest in thee.” Jesus came to earth that we might know rest and release from fear, but we must seek Him as actively as the Magi and shepherds did.

Luke recounts the story of Martha, who worries and frets over all that she has to do in life, and her sister Mary, who sits at the feet of Jesus. In the story, Jesus gently rebukes Martha for failing to see that Mary has found the one thing that is needed, the one thing that will prevent her from becoming “worried and upset about many things”: an undivided devotion to Jesus. In John 14:27 Jesus promises, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you,” so let us join Mary, the shepherds, and the Magi in seeking after the one thing that is needed, a knowledge of Jesus who was born to bring us peace.

Emily Scheie is a student at Asbury University. She is in her senior year studying English and Spanish and is from Cincinnati, OH.

GROWING PAINS

[T]hose who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint” (Isaiah 40:31).

I witnessed a precious lesson one day outside Wal-Mart. A woman had just purchased a tiny pink bicycle with training wheels for her 5-year-old granddaughter. The little girl, dressed head-to-toe in pink, smiled proudly as she maneuvered her color-coordinated bike with her grandmother alongside. All was going well until the bicycle began to pick up speed in the sloping parking lot. The grandmother reached for the handlebars but her granddaughter brushed her away valiantly trying to gain control herself. With white knuckles and solemn determination she clutched the pink tasseled grips. Luckily, their car was close, and both exhaled a visible sigh of relief as the tiny bike bumped the car’s fender, coming to a completely safe stop. Then the triumphant little biker gracefully dismounted and proudly helped to tuck her new sign of independence into the trunk of their car.

Christians are taught, “Be strong and courageous....Do not be afraid or terrified” (Deuteronomy 31:6). But that promise does not guarantee that we will not have to face the bumps and bruises.

Like the brave little bicyclist, a new Christian has to be given space to mature and grow. If s/he is not given room to develop, s/he would never learn to appreciate how our Lord allows growth through some tough lessons. It must hurt God to see our human frailties and poor choices; but like a loving parent, He is always there for us.

Sharon Madison, a member of WFMC for over 25 years, and her husband, Keith, work for SCORE International, a Christian mission group. They take baseball teams, players and lovers of the game to the Dominican Republic for short-term mission trips.