The Songs of Christmas
2014 Advent Devotional

Introduction – Jon Wilterdink

There is something special about Christmas music, so special in fact that once Thanksgiving in concluded radio stations launch into twenty-four-hours-a day Christmas music until December 25th! For many, however, the music is only background noise. The music is white noise to fill any potential dead space with lyrics of Santa, reindeer, chestnuts, silver bells, and general merriment. To quote Charlie Brown, "Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?" Of course there are Christ-centered songs that play at the mall, at stores, and even office parties, but does anyone really listen to what those songs are saying? This season of Advent, preparing for the arrival of Christ, is about reclaiming the songs that tell the story of Christ. Songs whose lyrics give depth and breadth to our worship, songs that lift our spirits, and songs that prepare us for the arrival of God's word into the world.

In the midst of planning this Advent, the pastors of Mentor United Methodist Church and Hope Ridge United Methodist Church unknowingly both decided to let the songs of Christmas drive the focus of Sunday worship. Apparently the Holy Spirit was saying something! As I sent out invitations to write these reflections, my initial excitement morphed into a brief panic attack as the thought occurred to me one night, "What if I get twenty-five reflections on *Silent Night*?" Needless to say I was amazed at the diversity of music that draws people's hearts to God. I was blown away by the meaningful connection these songs make in the most vulnerable places. I found inspiration in the fact that people can experience the same song like *Silent Night* in so many different ways.

I pray that this devotion be a guidebook for you on the journey this Advent towards the arrival of Christ. As you read the reflections grounded in Christmas music that proclaims God's good news of Jesus, I hope your own heart and mind are opened to the wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

I would like to thank all the people who provided reflections using the beloved songs of Christmas. Thank you, Reverend Tadd Butler, for bringing your wisdom and theological insight to the Sunday reflections; these added a personal layer to the Sabbath of Sunday worship. Thank you to Sue Nahumck, Maggie Goats, Kathy Tripepi-Bova, Jonathan Gordon, Rev. Kathy Dickriede, Yvonne Oyler, Kathy Root, Nancy Landerholm, Rem Siekmann, Pam Wooledge, Pat Humphrey, Lara Proegler, Vic Noviski, Pastor Quincy Wheeler, and Cheryl Noviski for writing reflections that so clearly display why the songs of Christmas bring not only joy but also the light of Christ into each of our lives. Thank you to those who proof read, re-read, and edited these reflections so they were communicated with clarity. Finally, thank you to Jan and Carol Benroth who use their graphic design as well as printing resources to bless the body of Christ.

Pastor Jon Wilterdink

November 30 – "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing"

"Christ by highest heav'n adored, Christ the everlasting Lord! Late in time behold Him come, Offspring of a Virgin's womb, Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, Hail the incarnate Deity, Pleased with us as man to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel. Hark! The herald angels sing "Glory to the newborn King!"

You have probably heard the saying, "The only thing that is constant, is change." It sounds like something that someone first said in recent years as they looked at how rapidly the world around us is changing. Surely in the age of technology it is easy to point to things around us that have changed. Our whole society is changing how we live, work, and play. The quote actually comes from a philosopher, Heraclitus, who lived about five hundred years before the birth of Jesus Christ. Change is always taking place around us.

Paul, in his letter to the Philippian Christian community, is lifting up and celebrating the fact that God changed, emptying Himself in order to become a humble servant. Being humble and obedient are not characteristics that are prized by society, but that is exactly what Christ was, even to the point of becoming human and dying on the cross for our sake. Certainly not the type of conquering hero the people would expect in that day or ours. It's not the image Hollywood would bring us of a hero, but it is God's way getting our attention and modeling what a Godly life looks like.

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to His own advantage; rather, He made Himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledges that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. ~ Philippians 2:5-11

Paul wants us to recognize the powerful change that God has for us in Jesus. He also wants us to recognize the change in us. He is saying we should become humble servants in the light of what Christ has done for us in His birth into this world and His death on the cross for our sake. While so much of society sets forth a different pattern for living in this world, the pattern we follow is the example of Christ's humility and service to others.

What does that mean for you today? How can you reflect the change that has happened in your life because of the gift of Jesus Christ?

December 1 – "Mary, Did You Know?"

So [The Shepherds] hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ~ Luke 2:16-19

As I reflected on my favorite Christmas hymn, I was drawn to this memory. In 1984 I was a young mother of two small boys. It was also the same year when my favorite Christmas hymn, "*Mary Did You Know?*", was written. As a full time stay-at-home mother, my days were filled with Fisher Price, Legos, Mr. Rogers and Sesame Street. I loved getting ready for Christmas: putting up the advent calendar to open each day, setting candles in the windows, putting up our stockings, and of course putting up the tree! The boys would get more excited each day.

I would think about the many Christmas songs I'd sung throughout my own childhood and later in school and church choirs. There were many that I looked forward to singing year after year, especially "*Silent Night*" on Christmas Eve when the church would be lit with candles. The first time, however, I heard the song "*Mary Did You Know?*" I was moved to tears. Here was another young mother like me, looking into her Son's face and seeing all the possibilities His life held, just like I did for my boys. But then, I was struck by the overwhelming knowledge that Mary "pondered in her heart." Even though she knew the mission and purpose for God sending her Son, did she think of it that night?

Whenever I hear or sing that hymn, I think about looking into the faces of my own sons and how Mary must have felt looking into her baby's beautiful face. The line from the song that touches me the most is, *"And when your kiss your little baby, you have kissed the face of God."* How amazing that God would come into the world as a tiny, helpless, newborn totally dependent on his parents to survive! The reminder is there for me in this hymn: , Jesus in creator, sacrifice, savior and Lord of All. What begins at Christmas will have its ending at Easter, the Alpha and Omega. The song continues:

Mary, did you know that your baby boy is Lord of all creation?
Mary, did you know that your baby boy would one day rule the nations?
Did you know that your baby boy is heaven's perfect Lamb?
This sleeping child you're holding is the great I Am."

God, I thank you for sending Christ into this world and thank you for Mary, who cared for her baby as he grew in wisdom and age. Help us live like Mary, who saw in her child so much potential and possibility. Help us be like Jesus, who was willing to live out His purpose while here on Earth. Amen

December 2 – "The Friendly Beasts"

"This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." ~ Luke 2:12

My favorite Christmas hymn is "*The Friendly Beasts.*" I remember singing it in the Junior Choir at the church Christmas program when I was seven or eight. When I began teaching Elementary General Music in Mentor in the early 1970s, I was pleased to find it in the second grade music book. What fun to share it with the students and their parents at the annual Christmas program!

The song tells of the donkey, shaggy and brown, who carried Mary up hill and down; the cow, all white and red, who gave Jesus his Manger for a bed; the sheep with the curly horn who gave Him his wool for a blanket warm; the doves from the rafter high who cooed Him to sleep so that He would not cry. There is even one version which has a verse about the camel, all yellow and black that brought Him a gift in the wise men's pack!

Growing up on a farm, we had many barn cats and they became my playmates since we lived in the country. I always wondered why the song didn't include a verse about the cat because they are always plentiful in a stable! Doing some research, I found the Legend of The Tabby Cat. I think it is a great story for all cat lovers. Here it is:

"The stable was quiet as the creatures gathered around the manger. The lamb, the donkey, the cat, the mice and the doves watched as Mary softly sang lullabies to her baby, but Baby Jesus whimpered restlessly. Swiftly the tabby cat leapt into the manger and began to purr with a deep soothing hum. Baby Jesus snuggled into a comforting sleep. In gratitude to the tabby cat, Mary marked an M on the tabby's forehead. Ever after, tabby cats are marked with the Madonna's M in memory of this love for the Baby Jesus. I take comfort in knowing that God saw fit to have these loving animals there on the night that our Savior was born. It fits right in with the knowledge that Christ is the Lord of all creatures great and small! May you and your family have a blessed Christmas and enjoy celebrating our Savior's birth!

Dear Heavenly Father, help us to take time from our "busyness" to remember the true reason we are celebrating this Christmas Season. Thank you for sending your Son to save us from our sins. Guide us, so that our lives will glorify you and your Son, Jesus Christ. It is in His name that we pray. Amen.

December 3 – "O Come, O Come Emmanuel"

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion ~ Psalm 137:1

Every Advent I come back to the song "O Come, O Come Emmanuel." I have sung this song for years. I grew up going to church and remember many advents of dressing up as a sheep, cow, donkey, and after auditioning, a wise man! I really noticed this song, however, when I was in college. During one Christmas back home, my younger brother invited me to listen to one of his new CD (these are four-inch discs with coded music on them for anyone under thirty). The CD itself was an amalgamation of secular carols, original songs, and sacred hymns.

As I listened to "*O Come, O Come Emmanuel*" in a context outside of the church organ I grew up with, I was struck by how "Un-Christmasy" the song sounded. The verse of the song, built on minor chords, creates this sense of tension and unease. The musical structure itself seems to project that something is amiss. Layer the lyrics on top of the music and the anxiety becomes clear: "*O, Come, O Come Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel who mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear."* For generations people have felt heartbreak and asked "Where is God?" After being exiled from their homeland and marched the distance from Cleveland to St. Louis, the chosen people Israel sat by the river weeping and asking "Where is God?" Each verse begins with "O, Come!" Please God, arrive… Get here… Show up!

There have been past Christmases when I have called out to God with the same anxiety. "I'm Lonely… God, show up! My wife is depressed… God, show up! I don't know if there will be enough money this year… God, show up! I am stressed by all the stuff that is supposed to make me happy… God, show up!" Yet each chorus resolves into major chords and lyrics of hope: "*Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel."* Even in the midst of a not-so-perfect-Christmas, Jesus still manages to show up. Every year I am reminded by this song that God never stops pursuing me. Christ has come, and in every season I can rejoice!

God, even when we are in a not-so-perfect-Christmas season, when we are calling out for you to show up, when we are weeping over disappointments, remind us that Jesus has come to be the light in our lives. Amen.

December 4 – "Silent Night"

While they were [in Bethlehem], the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. ~Luke 2:6-7

It is impossible for me to have a favorite Christmas song since almost all of them have come to find a place in my heart. These songs take me back to times and places long forgotten by some, yet cherished by me. As I reflect on the power of these songs, "*Silent Night"* is one of my many favorites.

When I hear the song "*Silent Night,"* I am but a child of five standing on tippy toes to see what my mother has strategically placed just beyond my reach. A dilapidated box is home to the tiny baby lying in a manger with Mary and Joseph nearby. This is no ordinary nativity set. Every once in a while, with a mere turn of a dial, "*Silent Night"* quietly plays. I am sure that my eyes light up almost as bright as the blue bulb plugged into the back and illuminating the giant star.

At seven years old I am able to reach the dial, and on more than one occasion I find myself turning it until music fills the dark and quiet room. I am drawn to this amazing box that houses this tiny family and for a few minutes all seems right with the world. I am a child of nine walking to midnight mass on Christmas Eve with my sister. This is one of many songs we sing as we trudge through the snow on an otherwise "silent night". The thought that we may wake people sleeping in their beds does not hinder the strength of our young voices. I am eighteen years old and living on my own. My first holiday is one in which I search for any sign of familiarity as Christmas approaches. "*Silent Night*" comes on the radio and even though there are a few tears, I find myself able to smile.

Years have passed. I am a mother and a grandmother. I have a nativity of my own, just like the one my mother had so many years ago. I never put my nativity out of the reach of little hands. They could look at it, they could touch it, and they could listen to it if they wished. Perhaps that is why I have only two wise men, a donkey with a missing leg and a camel who can no longer stand up! It is nothing short of a miracle that the music box still plays.

The song "*Silent Night"* tells me that God loves us so much that He sent His son to live among us. The song tells of the heavens rejoicing in the knowledge that this tiny infant had left the comforts of heaven to offer us redeeming grace. On a personal note, this song tells me that when I am quiet and stop trying to do things my way, God offers me peace. I also love the reminder that no matter where I am at in my life; whether a curious five-year-old trying to touch something out of reach, a lost young adult looking for a safe place to fall, or a grandmother missing the chatter of little children, God loves me.

God of every season, thank you for the gift of Jesus Who fills our silent nights with joy, hope, peace, and love. Help us as we prepare for the arrival of Christ to invite others into times and places where they can experience Your beauty. Amen

December 5 – O, Holy Night

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. ~ Deuteronomy 6:4-5

They say in advertising that it takes seven times to actually "hear" a message for the "first" time. With that said, I'm sure that I probably heard this Christmas hymn many times before actually "hearing" the message. I was about 8 years old when I walked passed the TV and *Home Alone* happened to be playing. I had seen the movie several times by that point, but in this particular instance, I stopped dead in my tracks. It was the part of the movie where Kevin, (Macaulay Culkin's character) is roaming around his neighborhood and realizes that all of his neighbors are busy celebrating Christmas with their family. He's wandering around feeling lost and alone but somehow manages to find himself in a church. When he enters the church on Christmas Eve, the church is nearly empty and the choir is singing, "*O Holy Night*." I remember feeling moved by the music even before I understood the meaning of the words. In this part of the movie, the song was meant to be background noise. For me, it was what stood out.

Enough about Home Alone… My parents wanted to raise me to be a cultured and well-rounded individual. That meant I had to endure piano lessons twice a week. I would either walk or take my bike down the street to meet with my eccentric, psychic piano teacher. She was ironically named Candy and married a man with the last name of Cane (I couldn't make that up). My very next lesson I entered Candy Cane's house with a sense of excitement because I found a piano book with Christmas music and it happened to have 'O Holy Night'. At that point, the Christmas book was too advanced for the level I was playing at, but I wanted to give it a shot. After we went over my current pieces and I wasn't assigned any reviews, Candy Cane started leafing through my music books to assign me several new pieces to work on throughout the course of the week. That's when I brought out my Christmas book and told her what I had in mind. I was expecting her to meet me with some resistance, but she didn't. I worked hard to learn the piece and I really got to know the music, along with the lyrics. As I became comfortable with the song, I was able to feel what the piece was truly about. It was how one event changed everything. The song almost starts off light hearted and even serene. Then the chorus comes in:

Fall on your knees, O hear the angel voices! O night divine, O night when Christ was born!

The mood of the whole piece changes in the chorus. If you couldn't understand English, you would be able to feel with all of your being that at this point in the song, the chorus is trying to tell you something very profound and important. That Christ became man. Not for His sake, but for ours. It was such an amazing act of love that God would will his Son down to earth for our sake to be sacrificed. It wasn't just a general gift to the human race, it was personal. Jesus became man and when he was crucified on the cross, he saw every single one of us. It was for MY SAKE. The thought of that brings me to my knees and I can't help but to feel amazingly unworthy of such a gift. It reminds me that while I could never earn such a gift in my lifetime, I try to devote my life to displaying the amazing gratitude that I feel. This song, always remind of that; that I owe everything to Him.

God thank you for Christ who redeems my life and for the opportunity to come before you every day asking for your Holy Spirit to perfect my ability to love my

December 6 – *Joy to the World (Unspeakable Joy)*

"Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music; make music to the Lord with the harp, with the harp and the sound of singing, with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn – shout for joy before the Lord, the King." ~ Psalm 98:4-6

My absolute favorite Christmas song is *Joy to the World (Unspeakable Joy)* by Chris Tomlin – but it certainly didn't used to be. I grew up with a very contemporary Christian background. Praise songs always played a significant role in my time of worship. Whenever Christmas time came around, however, it was the untouched, centuries-old carols that truly pulled me into the Christmas spirit. For the first twenty years of my life, I was enraptured by the verses of *Joy to the World*, a paraphrase of the last five verses in Psalm 98. The carol begins as the heavens and earth rejoice and celebrate in the welcoming of their Savior and ends in adoration of the wonders of His righteousness and love. These lyrics and scripture drew me into a state wellbeing.

In October of 2009, however, contemporary Christian artist Chris Tomlin modified my favorite carol, I was not pleased. My church elected to adapt this new version for the upcoming Christmas season, and I was to be the pianist on the praise team. All throughout the rehearsals for the Christmas Eve service, I remember taking on a mindset that would not allow me to engage in worship all based on this trivial addition of a new chorus. As we started the first service that 24th of December, everything changed. In the chaos of last minute preparations and service modifications, my mind was incapable of focusing on my inability to accept the modified carol. When the Praise Team began to play the new chorus, I was taken by surprise and instead focused on the words I was singing. At that moment, I realized exactly why this chorus had been added to a song nearly 300 years old.

Joy, unspeakable joy, an overflowing well, no tongue can tell.
Joy, unspeakable joy, rises in my soul, never lets me go."

Inexpressible, glorious, unspeakable joy; 1 Peter 1:8 says, "Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy." According to the Bible, joy is an amazing and powerful emotion; joy makes us strong, lifts us up, and makes us laugh. Joy is a demonstration of God, available to all people, at all times, and in every place. Joy can leave us speechless. When I think of this unspeakable joy, I think of a joy that cannot be fully explained and must instead be experienced. From that Christmas Eve of 2009, this song has meant more to me than I could ever say!

God I thank you for overwhelming, indescribable joy. This Advent, help me sing words of an unspeakable joy, overflowing with the love and power of Christ. Amen

December 7 – "O, Holy Night"

"Truly He taught us to love one another; His law is love and His gospel is peace. Chains shall He break for the slave is our brother And in His name all oppression shall cease. Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we; let all within us praise His holy name."

Fred Craddock, in an address to ministers, caught the practical implications of consecration. "To give my life for Christ appears glorious…To pour myself out for others. . . to pay the ultimate price of martyrdom, I'll do it. I'm ready, Lord, to go out in a blaze of glory. We think giving our all to the Lord is like taking $l, 000 and putting it on the table… 'Here's my life, Lord. I'm giving it all.' But the reality for most of us is that He sends us to the bank and has us cash in the $l, 000 for quarters. We go through life putting out 25 cents here and 50 cents there. Listen to the neighbor kid's troubles instead of saying, 'Get lost.' Go to a committee meeting. Give a cup of water to a shaky old man in a nursing home. Usually giving our life to Christ isn't glorious. It's done in all those little acts of love, 25 cents at a time. It would be easy to go out in a flash of glory; it's harder to live the Christian life little by little over the long haul." When we respond to the call of God with faith as Christians that is how we live it out best. It's in the small moments each day responding in faith to the call of God and the needs of humanity.

We have all had the unfortunate opportunity to see global, national, communal, and personal hardships in this world. Faith believes that God has something greater in store for us and then it becomes active in the striving for that better future. God doesn't always expect us to make a big splash as an individual to accomplish justice and healing. Often times it starts with just a ripple from us, and that ripple builds as others see the need and respond for the change. We may never get name recognition of people like Mother Theresa who followed her faith with action in the world to bring healing to people but we are still to respond to the worlds struggles justly.

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. ~Isaiah 9: 2

Hugh Duncan wrote in *Leadership Journal*, "I recently read about an old man, walking the beach at dawn, who noticed a young man ahead of him picking up starfish and flinging them into the sea. Catching up with the youth, he asked what he was doing. The answer was that the stranded starfish would die if left in the morning sun. 'But the beach goes on for miles and miles, and there are millions of starfish,' countered the man. 'How can your effort make any difference?' The young man looked at the starfish in his hand and then threw it to safety in the waves. 'It makes a difference to this one,' he said."

How can you work for justice in your family, community, or the world in response to the coming of Jesus Christ?

December 8 – "We Three Kings Of Orient Are"

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight. ~Proverbs 3:5-6

In our context it is hard to imagine having a child or even the journey of pregnancy without the presence of the vision of ultrasound, the advisement of a trained professional, the labor unit, and the staff of nurses and techs who run them. Jesus, as well as millions of other children, have come into the world without the many luxuries of modern medicine that we have come to call necessities. Jesus was not born into a world of luxury, but he was still recognized as a king.

I remember my first trip to Cleveland to visit my eventual in-laws over the holidays. My wife thought it would be fun to take a drive down memory lane, showing all the places she grew up. In all honestly it was a great idea and really meaningful to see places that held a special place in her heart. What was not a great idea was taking local roads back from Cleveland to Mentor. As we made our way back along route twenty, it became clear that we were traveling through neighborhoods that many would call dilapidated. Soon we became very aware (or self-aware) that we stuck out like sore thumbs. As I think about the Christmas song *"We Three Kings of Orient Are"* I wonder if these wealthy travelers from the East started to think the same about Bethlehem. Perhaps they turned to one another and say, "This looks like a bad neighborhood, better strap the camels down…" Still they came to Jesus.

Jesus was born in the back water region of the Roman Empire, in the lap of poverty. He came into a world filled with brokenness, yet he modeled a life of love and grace to many people who would typically live in the dilapidated neighborhoods of route twenty.

O star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright,
Westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect Light.

The three wise men are a great example of what complete submission to God looks like. They journeyed to find this king they heard about, traveling through deserts, and risking being raided by thieves on the road, going into unknown cities, and even lying to a king to protect Jesus. The men had no idea where they were going, but placed their complete trust in a star to lead them. Just like the three men in this song followed a shining star to see Jesus when he was born, if we submit ourselves to God, He will direct our paths and be a perfect guide for our lives even when it is to the uncomfortable places.

God, I submit my daily life to you and ask you would guide my actions, thoughts, and conversations. Amen

December 9 – "In Bleak Mid Winter"

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

One of the many Christmas hymns that resonate with me is *"In the Bleak Midwinter."* What resonates with me is not the title or the first few verses, but ~~for~~ the last stanza that says, *"What can I give Him poor as I am?"* I grew up in a family of modest means. We were not poor, but we knew money had been hard earned and was therefore very carefully spent. At Christmas we kids would peruse the JC Penny catalogue to make up a wish list that covered our heart's desires; from new socks to a Corvette car! The lists would be circulated among the extended family to give insight into our current interests and trends.

I remember shopping with my family member's wish lists clutched in one hand and my meager "Christmas Club" savings money in the other. A big part of the experience was holding thoughts of family members close while we shopped; "Grandma would like this… Wouldn't Daddy look handsome in this?" The measure of the gift was not in what was spent on the item, but in the love and "heart" that was put into it by the giver.

I especially loved using the shiny items on the store shelves as inspiration for my personal creativity. "Lovingly made by hand" was a coveted designer label in our household! Store-bought gifts usually had some personal enhancement added. A handkerchief would be embroidered with initials for my father and grandfather; colorful potholders would be woven for my mother and grandmother; a scarf or cap in team colors would be knit for my brother or cousin; doll clothes would be stitched for my sister. On Christmas day, witnessing the reaction (and they were ALWAYS big ones) as the gifts were opened added to MY joy. Now, many years later, finding one of these tokens tucked away brings a flood of memories of those Christmases past and the LOVE that was exchanged through those gifts.

God, too, gives us gifts and not "just" at Christmas! He knows what is written on our innermost wish-list. He personalizes the gifts to us with His own hands. God delights when our response to His gifts is a joyful one! Our greatest gift back to Him is when we can live by the words to *"In the Bleak Midwinter."* Giving from what we have, always doing our part, and especially doing so from our heart. *"If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb; if I were a wise man I, would do my part; yet what can I give Him? (I can) give my heart."*

God, in this season of preparation help me to focus on the gifts that really matter. Help me think of how what I give can be filled with love for the person receiving it. Help me do my part as one of your beloved children. Amen.

December 10 – "Do You Hear What I Hear?"

[Jesus] said to them, "Go into the entire world and preach the gospel to all creation. ~ Mark 16:15

I remember hearing this song for the first time as a young adult at the church near my college. The choir was performing this song as a call and response. One woman led the song's melody and was quickly followed by the entire choir with the leading question of the song, "Do you hear what I hear?" You can probably imagine the choir and woman going back and forth like a conversation;

Said the little lamb to the shepherd boy, "Do you hear what I hear?"
Ringing thru the sky, shepherd boy, "Do you hear what I hear?"

As I have heard that song throughout many Christmases since, I have pondered the meaning it still has for us today. Jesus was born over two-thousand years ago, but somehow people across the world still take time resources to remember the occasion of His birth. Have you ever stopped to think about how people found out about His birth? The song *"Do You Hear What I Hear?"* gives us an example of how the news of His birth might have spread. The song starts with the Holy Spirit asking the lamb, "Do you see what I see?" The Lamb then goes to the shepherd and asks, "Do you hear what I hear?" The Shepherd immediately goes to the King and asks, "Do you know what I know?" When they shared what God had told them, an entire nation heard about the birth of their Savior, Jesus, and what His birth meant for the entire world.

This was not just the way the news of His birth spread. During Jesus' life people went to their villages, towns, and cities telling their friend, "You have to come hear this guy!" Crowds gathered around and followed Jesus wherever He went because people shared the news. After Christ's resurrection His followers went out and told people about what they experienced.

Our calling as followers of Christ is to share with others the good news of Christ's birth, life, death, and resurrection! This sharing can be as simple as an invitation to hear, to listen to something beautiful. One of my favorite parts of the Christmas season is all the music at church. The feeling of the season comes alive through what is heard by choirs, organs, bands, and orchestras. Sharing the gospel does not have to start with sitting down and reading the bible to someone or asking if they have a personal relationship with Jesus . It can come through asking a friend or neighbor to come to worship or a Christmas concert with you, making sure they are introduced to others when they come, and getting them a cookie and coffee. Just like this song of Christmas, God reveals Himself to all of us in different ways. What are we doing with what God gives us?

God, I offer my hobbies, interests, and passions to be used by You as ways to share the story of Christ. Help me lead people this season to Jesus through the simple invitation to come and hear. Amen

December 11 – "Silent Night"

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." ~Luke 2:14

The hymn *"Silent Night"* has two special meanings for me. I remember when I first played this as part of the bell choir on Christmas Eve. Like many Christmas Eve services, there came a time when the lights went out and one by one, candles were lit to fill the room with light. The darkness, however, makes reading the music and playing the bells a little problematic! We needed to have someone come and hold a candle for us so we would be able to see the music. Our daughter did this for me year after year. ears of standing in the darkness together, her candle lighting the space that allowed us to play as the worship service filled with the light of Christ. These moments are a special shared memory that we will always have.

The other special meaning comes from something one of my preschool Moms shared with me this year. Over the course of a school year, children, especially preschoolers, become comfortable around their teachers. In light of this, there are times when the children share with their teachers what is important to them. After school one day I approached this particular mother and told her that her son sang the Ohio State Fight song to me at school. She laughed and said to me that when the child's dad puts the boys to bed at night he sings the Ohio State fight song to them (O-HI-O)! She continued on to tell me that when she puts them to bed she sings "*Silent Night*" to them! I said, "all year long?" She replied, "Yes!" because every often as possible she wants to tell her boys to "sleep in heavenly peace". I thought this was such a sweet and loving act to do for her children. As I hear the song *"Silent Night"* and hear how it connects with people's lives, I am reminded that God is always with us. Every night we "sleep in heavenly peace" surrounded by His love.

God, as I go to sleep tonight would You send Your Holy Spirit to surround me with the peace you offer each of us through your son Christ. Amen

December 12 –" It Came Upon A Midnight Clear"

"Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and He will dwell with them. They will be His people and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." ~Revelation 21:3-4 NIV

When the angels first sang about peace on Earth and goodwill to all men, the shepherds must have wondered what was going on. I am guessing that they probably did not hear angelic choirs every day. In reality, however, the world these field-workers lived in was hardly a peaceful place. First century Palestine was a tense time. The cities like Bethlehem buzzed with rumors of revolution against the Romans and aristocratic Israelites like Herod. Tensions between political and religious sects often boiled over into violence. Society was split along lines of gender, race, wealth and religion. The shepherds themselves were only a few rungs above beggars on the social ladder.

Many people in the First Century were expecting that the Messiah would be a military leader who came in, overwhelmed the Roman occupiers, gave abusive aristocrats like Herod the justice he deserved, and reestablished Israel as a country as when King David ruled. Yet this is not the kind of Kingdom Jesus seems to want; in fact he is eventually executed by the very powers people wanted the Messiah to overthrow!

The Christmas season can be just as complex. For some, Christmas is a time of friends and family, but for others it is a reminder of loneliness and separation. Are we still just as bewildered by songs of peace on Earth and goodwill toward all people? Christmas can be time when people hope joy comes through shopping trips, impulse purchases, and the perfection-oriented Christmas dinner. Surely, this year's Christmas will be the best! Yet when we come back to the Christmas story, we like the shepherds encounter a baby lying in the same place animals eat, in a low-income family, and with animals leaving things that are anything but the perfect Christmas gift. The words of *"It Came Upon a Midnight Clear"* perhaps resolve the tension:

When the new heaven and earth shall own the Prince of Peace, their King,
And the whole world sends back the song which now the angels sing.

Christmas reminds us of God's promise to bring in a Kingdom where wars, injustice and even death will be a thing of the past. God does have a plan. The worst thing is never the last thing. In the meantime, God continues to show His love to us in so many ways. He provides for our needs, answers prayers, and invites us to live today like citizens of the Kingdom to come. We can love one another as Christ loved us here and now. We can experience a foretaste of the new Heaven and Earth right now. We can share that experience with others. And we can do all this in the knowledge that God's Kingdom will prevail and that the whole of creation will one day see the truth that those shepherds heard on a remote hillside.

God, I pray that this Christmas I can trust that You are at work in my life and in the world. Show me places where I can live as a citizen of Your Kingdom here on earth. Amen.

December 13 – "While You were Sleeping"

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. 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 cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. ~ Luke 2:1-7

Every Christmas (and throughout the year) I listen to the song "While You were Sleeping" by Casting Crowns. This powerful song is about the arrival of Christ in a world that slept through His birth at Bethlehem. The song goes on to connect that many also slept (physically and spiritually) through His saving grace carried out on the cross outside Jerusalem.

Oh little town of Bethlehem, Looks like another silent night.
Above your deep and dreamless sleep, A giant star lights up the sky.
And while you're lying in the dark, There shines an everlasting light.
For the King has left His throne, And is sleeping in a manger tonight.

Oh Bethlehem, what you have missed while you were sleeping
For God became a man, and stepped into your world today
Oh Bethlehem, you will go down in history
As a city with no room for its King
While you were sleeping

The song reminds us that in the United States of America we need to make sure that we make room for our savior not only at Christmas but throughout the year. We as individuals and the church should not caught sleeping when the bridegroom Christ returns to take away His bride. Instead we should do our best to be awake and active in our spiritual life!

Every Christmas the world is caught up in the glitz and glamour of the holiday season. Department stores try to start the season earlier and earlier not because its "'tis the season," but to promote products and merchandise. The reason for Christ's arrival is lost in the noise and confusion. Time with family and friends is exchanged for the franticness of buying more and making more.

Dear God, may I in the silence of a "Silent Night" be ready for Christ's arrival. Ready my heart for His presence. Help me stay awake to His birth. Amen.

December 14 – *"Joy to the World"*
"No more let sin and sorrow grow, Nor thorns infest the ground;, He comes to make, His blessings flow, Far as the curse is found."

John Wesley, who began the movement that became today's United Methodist church, originally set out on a mission: "To spread scriptural holiness throughout the land." Wesley saw in his time, many people who were not so interested in living out a vibrant faith that included personal spiritual growth and helping their neighbors. He wanted people to experience the love and grace of God and to respond to it by living it out in the world.

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). ~Matthew 1:22-23.

Being Christian means trying each day to live in the image of Christ and less in the image that the world around us sets before us as the ideal. We need to grow in holiness, or what Eugene Peterson translates as the God-shaped life in "*The Message.*" It isn't always the easy way. Often it is the harder path to take and yet God is with us. That is what Emmanuel means, "God with us." That's what happened in the birth of Christ as the angel announced to Joseph what was to happen. God would be with us, helping us, teaching us, and ultimately dying on the cross so that we might overcome sin in this life.

As John Wesley reminds us, we have tools to help us live this God-shaped life. He called them means of grace, which put simply means ways that we can experience God's grace in our lives. They include individual practices like reading, meditating and studying the scriptures, prayer, fasting, regularly attending worship, and sharing our faith with others. They also include things we do as a community such as regularly sharing in the sacraments, Christian conferencing (accountability to one another), and Bible study. These are called works of piety.

There are also works of mercy that Wesley considered means of grace. Some of those practices include doing good works, visiting the sick, visiting those in prison, feeding the hungry, and giving generously to the needs of others. Remember the words of Christ, "What you did to the least of these you did to me." There is an outwardly active part of our faith that we must remember. It is these things that we do that help us maintain a Christ-centered life and help move away from a sin-centered life. By participating in these things, we get to experience God's grace renewing our spirits and empowering us to continue on our walk of faith and grow into the God-shaped life.

How are you growing into the likeness of Christ as we once again approach the manager and celebrate the gift of Jesus Christ coming into the world to save us?

December 15 –"I Celebrate the Day"

Even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you. For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. ~ Psalm 139:12-14

One of my favorite Christmas songs is sung by the modern Christian pop-music band, Relient K. In the song, Lead Singer Matthew Thiessen ponders this question of Jesus:

And the first time that You opened Your eyes, did You realize that You would be my Savior?
And the first breath that left Your lips, did You know that it would change this world forever?

I remember when I was a teenager feeling chills going down my spine as I heard those words. When did Jesus first realize who He was and what His destiny would be? The amazing thing is that we also have the chance to ask this question; "How amazing is that our God, the God of the universe, became a little baby, extremely limited in knowledge, completely powerless, and utterly at the mercy of the creatures He created?" Certainly, Jesus coming to earth is the most miraculous, earth-shattering event the cosmos has ever known, and we get to celebrate His coming to earth every year at Christmas. Thiessen continues in the song:

And so this Christmas I'll compare the things I felt in prior years
To what this midnight made so clear, That You have come to meet me here.

Christmas often brings back memories of things we've done, places we've gone, and people we have been. The pressure of trying to be a whole person with the broken pieces of our pasts can be incredibly hard. Thiessen's words remind us that the good news of Christmas is that God has come to meet us in the midst of our mess. He doesn't expect us to fix anything on our own; He invades our space with His love. The song ends with bells ringing forth and these words resounding on my ears:

And I, I celebrate the day, that You were born to die.
So I could one day pray for You to save my life, Pray for You to save my life.

The message of Christmas is not complete without the message of Easter, that Jesus was born in order to save His people from their sins. His life and His death are our greatest gifts. All this from a little baby; did that little baby have any idea what was ahead of Him? I don't know for sure, but I like to think He didn't know. All He knew when He opened His eyes was love, love for His mother and father, love for shepherds, love for stars shining brightly in the sky, and love somewhere deep inside that tiny heart for me born almost 2,000 years later. What a Savior!

God, I celebrate that You continue to reach for me and never give up on me. As I live and move this Advent, make me aware of moments when You are speaking to me. Amen.

December 16 – "Mary, Did you Know?"

[The Magi] went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. ~Matthew 2:9-10

"Christmas decorations go up so early! Songs begin on the radio before the orange of autumn is gone. Cinnamon smells overwhelm pumpkin spice all too soon." That is one way to look at it; but what if this gives God even more time to witness to people about the coming of a Savior? The earlier Santa comes out, the longer the Holy Spirit can slip in songs about the baby Jesus or Joy to the World.

A favorite Christmas song of mine is "*Mary Did You Know?"* I first heard the song by the men's choir at church. Any time I think about my friend Beau who has since passed, I remember how much she loved hearing them sing any song. The lyrics of this Christmas song tell us about the baby Jesus as well as the adult Jesus who performed miracles, taught about justice, and delivered us all from our own brokenness. The lyrics play with words like *deliver*, the *face of God*, and *new*.

Your child has come to make you new…
T*his Child that you delivered will soon deliver you…*
W*hen you kiss your little baby you kiss the face of God…*

My niece is not being raised in a church. She has a great and loving family, but they are not seeking a relationship with God or a faith community. Right now, however, she is listening to Pandora Christmas music all of the time. She is old enough to sit in the front seat and have some control over the radio. She shared with me last year that her favorite Christmas song is "*Mary Did You Know?"* Suddenly I had a whole new appreciation for 24/7 Christmas music beginning in October! Praise God! Not only is she hearing about the baby Jesus, she is learning about salvation and what Jesus did in his lifetime. She is hearing stories about Jesus' justice; healing the blind, the lame, and the deaf. She is hearing songs about angels, hope, heaven, and the face of God. God is reaching in and meeting her where she is. This led to a great conversation about what that song is about, who I believe Jesus is and what He did for her.

This song reminds me that I serve a God who breaks into this world in any and every way! God shows up and reaches into our life, pursuing us and wooing us to kiss the face of God this Christmas season. Sometimes as Christ followers we forget what it is like to not be a Christ follower. We think we know everything there is to know about God and how God works. We get all preachy and holier than thou about how Christmas is done, or spelled (Xmas) or said, "Happy Holidays or Merry Christmas," or when Christmas appears on the department store shelf and on which radio station. This story and this song are a reminder to me to be faithful and just go with it and realize God is there. Prayers for my niece get answered. I can't wait to hear what her favorite Christmas song is this year!

God, I give thanks for the baby who makes us new and takes our blinders off to see You at work in new ways. I admit that I don't know it all, and there is more to discover in this relationship with You as I journey to the manger . Amen

December 17 –" Hark! The Herald Angels Sing"

But for you who revere my name, the Sun of Righteousness will rise with healing in his wings. And you will go free, leaping with joy like calves let out to pasture. ~Malachi 4:2

The beauty of God and music is that has the power to speak to us in every stage of life. The same is true for my favorite Christmas song! What stands out to me in the music and lyrics of my favorite Christmas song *"Hark! the Herald Angels Sing"* depends on where I am in my journey of life. In this season of my life the line of the song that proclaims,"*Ris'n with healing in his wings"* has stood out to me. This line was originally taken from the book of Malachi in the Old Testament. The words of comfort and hope from the prophet jump out at me. The prophet was speaking immediately to the people of Israel that despite the hardships they faced and their own brokenness, God could heal them. At the same time God speaks through Malachi for generations to come, that even in our time God can still heal people. We see this power lived out through Jesus.

Since the truths of the God's word are changeless, we can be assured of the fact that Jesus still has healing power. Yes, Jesus can still heal the sick and does heal the sick. In addition to physical healing, He can heal our broken lives and broken hearts. Jesus can heal addictions, marriages, emotional scars, fear, anxiety, self-centeredness, sin, hard hearts, and the list goes on and on. I am struck by how the lyric "Light and life to all he brings" precedes the phrase about healing.

How does Jesus heal us? He infuses his very life into our lives, lighting our way and removing the darkness so we can be healed. We must allow His life and light to penetrate our darkness. This comes by asking Jesus to be part of our lives, spending time in His Word, talking to Him, and letting the truths of the great songs of the faith which are based on God's Word penetrate deep into us. Psalm 107:20 states, "He sent out His word and healed them and delivered them from their destruction". So we sing "Glory to the Newborn King". This is not just a carol we sing at Christmas, it is a song with truths that are relevant throughout the year.

God, I ask that you would send Your spirit of healing to me this Advent. I invite You to be a part of my life and shine light into my darkest places. Amen.

December 18 –" Nigh Bethlehem"

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. ~ Romans 8:1-4

As I think about meaningful Christmas songs, particularly ones that have impacted me, I am always drawn to "*Nigh Bethlehem*" by Alfred Burt Carol, especially the rendition sung by the Singers Unlimited.

When I was in high school my family lived in Lake Forest, IL. We would be invited next door to our neighbor Don Shelton's house for a neighborhood chili and chowder party at Christmas time. The home was filled with kind neighbors, wonderful holiday aromas and music from the singing group which Don was a part of, The Singers Unlimited. Their first album, Christmas, was debuted at their home. On it were five Alfred Burt carols including "*Nigh Bethlehem.*" Every time I hear this song it brings me back to a time of warmth, cheer, hope and a recognition of God's amazing gift of Jesus.

Besides having an amazing melody, especially when sung a cappella, the lyrics of the second and third verses continue to speak into these days, even though they were written in 1947:

"Peace and good will the Christ child brings, noel, noel, noel!
And saves all men from evil things,
for He of whom the angel sings is Lord of lords and King of kings!
Then sing noel, noel, noel! Then sing noel, noel!"

So Christian folk, put fear aside, noel, noel, noel!
And spread the gospel far and wide,
that joy be great at Christmastide, and God in Christ be magnified!
Then sing, noel, noel, noel! Then sing noel, noel!

Recalling this song, I am reminded that I can be truly joyful because of the Gospel of Jesus. We can now know God completely by knowing Jesus, and that we should be about the business of lovingly telling others about how He has changed lives. For me this generally starts by showing the best I can be to another person first! We don't need to be afraid of anything if we keep an eternal perspective on our lives. Everything on Earth I naturally value is rubbish compared to the glory of God. Because of this, my heart and voice can sing "Noel;" a celebration of the birth of Jesus, who is greater than any earthly king, God with us always, and we can be free from our evil ways by focusing on Him.

God, I praise You this season with my heart, voice, hands, and mind; "Noel." Amen.

December19 – "Angels We Have Heard On High"

Sing for joy, you heavens, for the Lord has done this; shout aloud, you earth beneath. Burst into song, you mountains, you forests and all your trees, for the Lord has redeemed Jacob, He displays His glory in Israel. ~Isaiah 44:23

As I think about my favorite Christmas songs, particularly ones that are Christ-centered, I continue to be drawn to the song *"Angels We Have Heard On High,"* which always seems to find its way into my celebration of the season. The chorus of the song, if you have not heard it, is filled with long ascending and descending notes right on the "o" of Gloria. I sometimes imagine creation singing this response just as the angels sang to the shepherd's the night Christ was born.

Angels we have on heard high
Sweetly singing ore the plains
And the mountains in reply
Echoing their joyous strains
Gloria in Excelsis Deo

Something about creation is filled with joy directed towards God. I have heard pastors and sermons that talk about nature as the first way God speaks to people. This is certainly true. It is easy to see God in a sunset, a sunny day on the lake, and untouched snow in the forest. These natural wonders inspire awe and wonder, a joyous strain that silently glorifies God. For me this is where the Christmas story gets really interesting. The night Christ was born was the most monumental and awe-inspiring event in human history. God was revealed by His Son on earth so that we could learn from Him and ultimately have eternal life through Him. There has not been an event in history before or after Christ's birth that resulted in so many people celebrating.

How was this celebratory event ushered into the world? Angels singing to a few shepherds working the night-shift in the field. What a sight! The jaws of the shepherds must have dropped at this amazing wonder filling the night sky. But the message of God did not stop with the moment of announcement. The angels told the shepherds to go and find the baby, and when they did they were so excited they went and told others. God's word was revealed in the night sky, but it was carried by the connection between people.

I love the outdoors and nature; I see God in the beauty of creation and the seasons. The danger for me is that there have been times when I thought that God was ~~only~~ speaking to me only through sunsets, nature walks, and snowfall. It is so easy to stop at the big, grand, glorifying, majestic moments and think that those are the only moments when God speak to us. The reality is that God's message of hope, peace, joy, and love is best carried out through relationships. Even though face-to-face relationships may not be as pretty as a sunset, God chose to share His message of salvation through people.

God, I give you thanks for Your son Christ who made friendships and met people where they were at in life in order to share Your message. Amen.

December 20 - "Joy to the World"

Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us. Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into this place of undeserved privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God's glory. ~Romans 5:1-3

Every year my mom would organize Christmas caroling for our small United Methodist Church. A few weeks before Christmas, my mom would begin calling elderly members of our community asking if they wanted carolers to come to their house. Some of these individuals were members of the church. Others were people in our community who knew about the event and asked if a group could come over. In addition to the singing, my mother would also order poinsettias for the youth to give out at each home, as well as a cake for the carolers to enjoy afterwards. We would bundle up and load into cars caravanning around our community. Living in a rural area it meant a little singing and a lot of driving. After visiting 5-10 homes we would all head back to the church for hot chocolate and cake in the basement.

Many times we started out with, *"Joy to the World,"* singing the good news as we approached each house. Sometimes it took a couple of songs before the person we were caroling for could make it to the door or before caregivers could wheel them to a window so they could see. Usually, they would clap and smile but sometimes as we sang slower carols, memories of missed loved ones would cloud their faces. Mom always stood beside them usually with an arm around their shoulder, often with tears in her eyes.

I remember the year we went to my grandparents' house. We had many times before, and Grandma usually made cookies or fudge to give out, but not this year. Grandpa had passed away in May after a long journey of Alzheimer's. Grandma was just not herself anymore. Grandma stood on the side porch as I gave her the poinsettia, hugging her and staying by her side. As we stood there together, I tried to sing but the lump in my throat just wouldn't allow it. Bittersweet tears came to both of us as I looked out at the rest of the carolers singing. Families whose lives were intertwined with ours through church, school and farming were singing about that silent, holy night so long ago. It was that place where light meets the dark, and it's in those moments when we can't sing for ourselves that others sing for us.

The songs of Christmas draw us into God's future. They remind us of the deep unshakable joy we have in Christ despite our pain. They remind us that we can sing, *"Joy to the World, the Lord has Come!"* because we know Jesus Christ has defeated death and darkness, sin and sorrow. We sing with hope that we will be with those loved ones again and there will be no more tears, sickness or sadness. We sing because one day He will put everything right and we will rejoice and live with Jesus forever. This is why He came. This is why we sing.

God, I dwell this season on the promise You revealed to us through Christ. Draw my attention to the moments that reveal Your future hopes for me and how You are at work to redeem me. Amen

December 21st – "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day"

And in despair I bowed my head; "There is no peace on earth," I said; "For hate is strong, And mocks the song Of peace on earth, good-will to men!" Then pealed the bells more loud and deep: "God is not dead, nor doth He sleep; The Wrong shall fail, The Right prevail, With peace on earth, good-will to men."

We tend to romanticize the story of the birth of Jesus, but it happened in the backdrop of tremendous hardship. First, Mary and Joseph traveled a distance to be counted in the census. Then they were told there was no room for them so the baby was born and placed in a manger. Oh and by the way, King Herod was hunting the baby down to have him killed since he wasn't in the mood to lose power as he perceived the prophecy. Indeed, the king was born in a lowly manger amid the hardships of the poor and not in a palace or place of high honor as on would have expected. However, in the midst of all of this were ordinary people simply being faithful to God's plan. Mary, Joseph, and the Magi were simply people acting in faith in extraordinary times.

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'" ~Matthew 2:3-6

It seems every generation has a story of hardship to share. Some generations had it worse than others. It is more than the old joke, "When I was a boy we walked miles to school in the snow… Uphill… Both ways!" There have been real struggles, wars, depression, recession, unemployment, and struggles communal and personal too numerous to mention.

God calls us to be faithful in these extraordinary times, but far too often we get caught up in the hardship and we lose our bearings. In those times, we need to be reminded God is still there with us. E. Stanley Jones, the 20th century Methodist missionary, wrote, "Faith is not merely your holding on to God -- it is God holding on to you. He will not let you go!"

We are ordinary people who serve an extraordinary God who will carry us through the most difficult and challenging times. All we are called to do is listen and respond in faithfulness to a loving God who will not let us go.

How can you be faithful in believing and acting in response to the kingdom that Jesus' birth establishes on earth?

December 22 – "Little Drummer Boy"

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

My favorite Christmas song is *"The Little Drummer Boy"* by Katherine Kennicott Davis. This is a well-known song, and played numerous times throughout the season on the radio and at events. I don't like it, however, because it's popular. I love this song because it moves me to tears every time I really listen to the music and words.

The song tells a story of a young boy taken to see a miraculous newborn. As I imagine this scene told by the songs lyrics, I see a young, possibly timid boy of modest means, feeling quite unprepared, ushered in to meet and worship the baby Jesus.

Isn't that sometimes how we feel? I know it is sometimes how I've felt; a bit unprepared, possibly a bit timid, feeling a little out of place when it comes to worshiping our Lord and Savior. But God always loves us, fully and completely, right where we are . He knows every part of our heart. He walks with us, through every step of life, even when we sometimes can't feel Him there.

Mary, Joseph, and the surroundings of Jesus' birth are all so humble. The lyrics share that the drummer boy in the song is also poor and does not come bearing gifts normally given at that time to a king. The boy, however, offers to play a song for Jesus on probably one of his only possessions, his drum. As I interpret the song, I would guess that the drummer boy wonders if his gift would be enough for the new King of Kings. He plays anyway. The boy gives Jesus his whole heart and a gift of song, worshiping Him, using the talents the Lord gave him. The gift was enough, because the boy offered his best to Jesus.

I am moved to tears because it is a much-needed reminder that God loves me for who I am, right where I am. He made me. He knows me. He loves me. We each have talents and gifts, given to us from God. The song illustrates to me how God wants us to use our gifts and talents in loving ways, even if it's all that we feel we have. You don't have to have elaborate gifts to give. You don't have to be rich. You don't have to be the best, or the smartest or the funniest or the most this or that. Just be you! That is enough for God. He made you. He knows you. He loves you. He just wants you to be you and offer your best to Him. My prayer for you is that the next time you hear *"The Little Drummer Boy,"* you really take in the words of the song and share in the realization that the drummer boy had; right now, right where you are, you are enough for God.

God of every good gift, I offer you my time, talents, and resources to you this Advent season so that Your work of love through Christ can be known. Amen

December 23 – "Silent Night"

Yet I am not silenced by the darkness, by the thick darkness that covers my face. ~Job 23:17

The church is dark, lit only by the flame from the Christ candle lit by the pastor at midnight. This is the culmination of the worship service, symbolizing the commencement of Christmas Day. The ushers light their white taper candles and walk toward the congregation . As they begin to light the smaller candles held by those along the aisle, I feel a nervous excitement build within me. It is the first time I have been allowed to stay up late enough to go to the 11:00 p.m. worship service. I had long wondered about the mystery of what went on at church so late on Christmas Eve. It is my turn to tip my candle into the flame held by my mother. I straighten it, watching the hot wax slowly run down the side of the candle. As the last candle is lit, the organ music fills the sanctuary. The hundreds of small flames join the flame of the Christ candle, enveloping me in a warm glow. *"Silent night, holy night…"* I hear my father's booming voice, my mother's, higher and softer. I am surrounded by those who love me on this very special night.

Fast-forward thirty-five years. It's Christmas Eve again at our new church home. We are at the early Children's service so we can tuck the children into bed before it gets too late. As I turn to watch the three wise men proceed up the aisle, my heart swells with pride and joy. My three sons make gift-bearing procession; Mark followed by Dan, then wee little David, bringing up the rear in his flowing robe and crown of gold. I turn as they reach the front of the sanctuary to see my precious daughter in her angel robe and wings. My eyes fill with tears as the familiar music fills the sanctuary, *"Silent night, holy night…"* Why am I crying? Why does this song cause such emotion to fill my soul?

Research has been done on the powerful effects of music on the brain. I became interested in studies that used music therapy with Alzheimer's patients as my mother traveled her journey with the disease. Experts believe that music stimulates areas deep within the amygdala and hippocampus, where emotion and long-term memory are processed. Both are less prone to the degenerative effects of Alzheimer's than the outer cortex. Familiar songs can serve as cues to recover memories.

December 5, 2008. I am sitting in between my mother and father at the Madrigal dinner at their church. As I cuddle close to Mom to listen to the Christmas music, she begins to tap out the song with piano fingers on my leg, her eyes lighting up with her smile as she sings along with the hymns. She may not remember what she had for dinner, but she remembers the words to these songs. For the final hymn, we are asked to stand and join hands. As the lone candle flickers, and the music fills the hall, once again the tears fill my eyes, *"Silent night, holy night…"* My father's voice blends with my mother's as they did so many years ago. As I squeeze their hands tight, I feel the same love and warmth I felt as a child.

Through this hymn I ponder how God sent His son to us in the form of a sweet, innocent babe on the holiest of nights. This babe grew into a man who suffered on a cross to save me from my sins. Because of his sacrifice, I will someday join my loved ones in his presence, and we will together sing *"Alleluia to our King."*

Eternal God, thank You for the hope I can find in Christ. Amen

December 24 – "O, Little Town of Bethlehem"
"O holy Child of Bethlehem, Descend to us, we pray; Cast out our sins and enter in, Be born to us today. We hear the Christmas angels The great glad tidings tell: Oh, come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Emmanuel!"

Ultimately, Advent is a season of preparation for the coming of Christ. We are celebrating and preparing for the birth of Christ each year as part of the Christian observances of his birth over two-thousand years ago, but we are also preparing for the eventual coming of Christ once again. We celebrate the relationship that God establishes with us through the Christ child who became our Savior.

God is always seeking to be in a relationship with us. That is why He invaded our human time and space with His son Jesus. If there are a thousand steps between us and God, then God will take the first nine hundred and ninety-nine in order that we might take just that one step toward God. God is constantly reaching for us to initiate that relationship even before we know it. United Methodists call that "prevenient grace." Think about a parent or grandparent reaching out in excitement as their infant tries clumsily to make their first step towards them. The longing, loving expression is like a magnet for the child. I image it is a bit like that for God.

The story has been told that when Hellen Keller was young, her teacher, Anne Sullivan, introduced her to Phillips Brooks, the author of the hymn "O Little Town of Bethlehem." Brooks was a minister and it was he who introduced her to Jesus Christ. Keller responded, "I always knew He was there, but I didn't know His name!" It is because of the people around her that she learned about who it was that was wooing her into an eternal relationship.

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." ~Acts 1:8

As Christians, from the first moment we respond to the wooing of God in our lives, we are meant to be living out the great commission as Jesus gave it to the Disciples in our reading from Acts. We are to go and make disciples of Jesus Christ as individual Christians and as a faith community. The mission set before us by Jesus is to connect others in relationship with God and His church.