This Advent Devotional Booklet is a special one.

In honor of our approaching fiftieth anniversary, your Education Committee has created a retrospective edition. Based on booklets produced in the mid-1990s the committee selected 25 devotionals written by members and pastors of that era. Some of these persons will be familiar faces; others are deceased or moved away.

As we begin our Advent season this year, may we prepare for the coming of Christ as we reflect on our history as a congregation.

Wishing you a blessed Advent,

Your Discipleship and Christian Education Committee
Advent 2008
The Word became flesh, and made his dwelling among us.  
We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only,  
who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.  
John 1: 14

There is a scene in the movie “Excalibur” that I am particularly fond of. You all remember the story of Arthur, the messianic figure of British lore. Arthur, having discovered Guinevere’s infidelity with his most trusted and valiant knight, Lancelot, fell into a mystical depression. His enemies had laid siege to the land, and it had become barren. Arthur sent out his remaining knights on a quest for the Holy Grail in an attempt to restore vigor to the throne and to the land.

The film paints a bleak picture of the land: the peasants were starving, working the desolate soil in vain, the once-vaunted Knights of the Round Table were being picked off one by one by Morgana, Arthur’s evil half-sister. Arthur finally marshals his forces, musters his strength and rides out himself, in a last-ditch effort to reclaim Camelot from the curse that was upon it. With the operatic strains of “Fortuna” pounding, Arthur gallops through a leafless orchard. As he does, the trees flower, and he rides through a blizzard of petals into battle.

It strikes me that this is an image of Christ’s coming, both at Bethlehem and at his return. Paul and the gospel writers make it plain that Jesus came “at just the right time,” to regain that which is lost, and to set the world in proper order.

Israel was under the heel of Roman occupation, God’s chosen people subjects of a ruthless and godless rule. Always, with a chorus of angels, and the world is restored. The rightful King has reclaimed his throne. There is something innate to humanity which desires, longs for, the Good King to be present with us. That’s what makes the story of Arthur, and the Christmas story, enduring.
Monday, December 1

*For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.*  
*James 2:26*

I have always been somewhat amused by people who search for God in caves, at secluded monasteries and even sitting atop flagpoles. The idea that one could possibly find some kind of spiritual fulfillment in these situations is totally foreign to me. There have been times that the solitude would have been welcomed, but not for long.

The Christmas story is a story of people actively looking for God. The shepherds went seeking the source of the Son of God. The Wise Men journeyed in search of the source of the special light of the star. All of these people went to fulfill a need for spiritual answers. The Wise Men evidently got more than they bargained for because they did not go back to report to King Herod that they, indeed, had found the true Son of God.

Think about all of the marvelous organizations and services that are the result of people looking for a way to serve God. Our own church meets the needs of countless people. There are international organizations that began as ideas of the mind of people who were looking for God. There are small, but no less important, ways that people continue the journey by quietly serving God. These people would be the first to say that they get far more out of what they do than they expected.

That's how things are when we go looking for God and we find something so much more. We look for ways to serve God and we end up getting more than we bargained for in the process. The important part is that one has to be an active participant. The true spirit of God is found through serving. Sitting in church will not make you a Christian, no more than sitting in a garage will make you a car. Church is a great springboard, but it is not the end of the searching. I like to think that Bethlehem was not the end of the line for the shepherds and the Wise Men, but rather just the beginning of a great adventure.

- Becky Capelouto
Tuesday, December 2

For me it is not our Lord’s first coming in the manger at Bethlehem, nor His second coming at the end of time that matters the most. What matters most to me is the expectation of Christ’s present coming as a reality in my life, and yours, today. The Advent season brings that heightened sense of expectation into focus. From the hymn “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus,” the lines “From our fears and sins release us, Let us find our rest in Thee,” bring renewed promise that God can be known in a direct and personal way through the gift of His Son.

We serve a risen Savior. We look to Him for life in the present, and through saving faith we feel the power of Christ in every dimension of our lives. He forgives the past AND the present, and offers hope for the future. Our reliance on Him never ceases. The true meaning and joy of our Advent preparation and Christmas celebration is the constant promise and expectation that we can have God with us, and in us.

Sing or read these beautiful words of joy and hope found in our Hymnal, no. 196:

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.
Israel’s strength and consolation, Hope of all the earth thou art;
Dear desire of every nation, Joy of every longing heart.

Born thy people to deliver, Born a child and yet a King,

Born to reign in us forever, Now thy Gracious kingdom bring.
By thine own Eternal Spirit, Rule in all our hearts alone;

By thine all-sufficient merit, Raise us to thy glorious throne.

Prayer: O God, you make us glad by the yearly festival of the birth of your Son, Jesus Christ. Forgive the past, heal the present, and give us hope for the future that we may joyfully receive Christ as our Redeemer and serve Him as our Lord. Help us to sincerely expect, welcome and respond to your gracious gift.

- Lewis Jones
Wednesday, December 3

Suffer the little children to come unto me, and hinder them not: for of such is the Kingdom of God. Truly, I say unto you, whosoever shall not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child, shall not enter therein.
Mark 10:14-15

It is said that Easter makes the church’s year, but as some Mel Torme lyrics say: whether you are 2 or 92, there’s nothing to beat the magic of the Christmas season. It does bring out the child in each of us.

Reflecting on my childhood in the Caribbean, and my Catholic upbringing, the magic of Christmas comes back in a special way. Snow is unknown in the Caribbean, and I remember being in awe of the beautiful winter scenes on Christmas cards which we had received.

For me, part of the Caribbean’s magic lies in the hour just before dawn, 5-6 a.m.: the calm and serenity before the sun bursts through, the birds singing in the trees, no traffic sounds -- What a beautiful world God made! It was during this hour, nine days before Christmas that my family and I, as Catholics, made the novena. How wonderful to hear the chants and litanies in Latin, the roar of the pipe organ, and to see the expectant faces of the congregation as we all prepared for the great gift which was to be visited upon the world. We came out of that hour renewed in the spirit, and refreshed as the early morning air. It was always a source of great joy for me, and that scene will forever live in my heart.

My prayer is that as God saw fit to give us the gift of the Holy Child, that we never lose our childlike innocence and trust in Him. I pray that the outpouring of love which we share with each other at Christmas continue every day in our lives.

- Olivia Ahyoung
Thursday, December 4

Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our father.” I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

Matthew 3:8-10

In these words John the Baptist is preparing the way for the coming of Jesus Christ. When I read these words they struck me in the heart. I became scared, concerned, and excited all at once. The first point that John makes when he rebukes the Pharisees and Sadducees here is that they are not saved by their ancestry. Just because they are descendants of Abraham does not mean that God will recognize them, nor does ritual worship alone achieve their salvation. It is the fruit that we bear which determines whether or not we will be cut down. We must remember to bear good fruit in all things. In our worship we must listen with our hearts, we must sing praises from our soul, and act on behalf of compassion and love. In all of this we bear good fruit and pave a path of glory for the coming of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Each day is a day to bear good fruit in our lives and in the lives of those around us. With each new day comes a new opportunity to bear witness to the Glory of God. These words remind us that “... this is the day that the Lord hath made, let us be glad and rejoice in it.” So remember in these upcoming days, and in each day of all the days of our lives, to rejoice and prepare the way for the coming of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

- Chris George
Friday, December 5

Whither shall I go from thy spirit? Or where shall I flee from thy presence?
If I ascend up to heaven thou art there; If I make my bed in hell, Behold thou art there.
If I take the wings of morning, and dwell in the utmost parts of the sea.
Psalm 139:7-10

The Freedman Class has just studied again Scott Peck’s book The Road Less Traveled. In it, he tells how our image of God is shaped by our childhood relationships with our parents. In my spiritual journey, God has often seemed distant to me. I am reminded that my father, a career Navy man, was often absent. But my spiritual life is often filled with "mountaintop experiences"—again, I am reminded of the great celebrations when my father returned home from a long cruise. How joyful to have Father with us. In the maturing of my image of God, however, I am learning that God is never gone. He is ALWAYS present and available. It is I who wander and then discover and rediscover God. Always with joy and celebration. My hope is to learn to walk daily with God and to fully trust in His Providence and Grace. Having a daily walk with God is my prayer for you this Christmas Season, and in the new year to come.

- Jim Cosper
Saturday, December 6

"Christmas Comes"

Christmas comes every time we see God in other persons.
The human and the holy meet in Bethlehem, or in Times Square.
For Christmas comes like a golden storm on its way to Jerusalem;
determinedly, inevitably.
Even now it comes,
In the face of hatred and warring
No atrocity too terrible to stop it, no Herod strong enough
No hurt deep enough, no curse shocking enough, no disaster shattering enough.
For someone on Earth will see the star; someone will hear the angel voices.
Someone will run to Bethlehem; someone will know peace and goodwill.
Christ will be Born!
(Reaching for Rainbows, by Ann Weems)

One year when I seemed to be busier than usual and actually dreaded December 25th, I read these words in a meditation by Rev. Barbara Stiles in The Journal. Suddenly, I realized that the "golden storm" would come to Tallahassee and to my own home just as it had to Bethlehem and Jerusalem. Of course, I wanted to "see the star" and "hear the angel voices," but how?

After reading Luke 2:8-20, I noticed that the shepherds were working on their regular schedule when they hear the angels. I knew that even in the midst of my hectic business, I could hear the "Glory to God!" and "Peace on Earth," of the heavenly host.

- Pearle Wood.
Sunday, December 7

Break forth 0 beauteous heavenly light,
And usher in the morning.

As I imagine Christmases yet to come, I cannot ignore the excitement of growing in my relationship with God, and the changes yet to come because of it. This year as worship committee chairman has been a challenge, and indeed a growing experience, as I have been invited into "deeper water". I have also been blessed with having many committed Christians working and "wading deeper" with me.

As Christmas approaches, I see the Christ Child in myself, a new creation, full of possibilities. I identify with the frailty and vulnerability of a newborn. Celebrating the birth of Christ gives each of us an opportunity to once again experience personally the new birth of faith and salvation.

We are all drawn to light. At Christmas, we imagine the heavens glowing with heavenly light, with angels singing, an attitude of expectancy in the air. As we experience the birth of Christ this year, let's all rejoice for the new spiritual creature that is yet to be revealed in each of us.

Prayer: We give thanks, God for your constant working in our lives to make us your new creatures. Draw us to your light, and give the assurance that the morning will be filled with joy!

- Melynn Canova
Monday, December 8

Luke 2:1-7

When I was in High school, it was quite the thing to take world history if you were planning on continuing on to college. I did, as well as a lot of my friends. Our teacher was very popular with the students. In class we studied some of the world religions, and were encouraged by our teacher to visit other religious facilities. One of my friends, Pat Sollaris, was Catholic. We went to church with Pat.

Let me digress to say that I had been raised my whole life in the Methodist Church. That included Sunday morning and evening services, MYF and Youth choir. The youth choir sang every Sunday morning at our early service. On the first Sunday of each month we had Communion, and the choir sang many responses (does this bring back memories for anyone else?).

Getting back to my trip to the Catholic Church, I felt somewhat at home because I recognized some of the responses as the same ones that we were used to singing. Pat invited us back at Christmas for midnight mass on Christmas Eve. I went with her and because I did, I have one of my most memorable faith moments up until that time. When you walked into the church, it was all decorated just as we do ours, only there was something missing--the Baby Jesus was not in the manger! It seems that since Christ was born on Christmas, that the priest brings the Baby Jesus down the aisle during the procession at midnight, and places him in the manger. I thought for several years that this was something they did in all Catholic Churches, but have since found out that it was the way this one church worshiped. This brought the true meaning of Christmas home to this teenager and gave her a memory she fondly writes about today.

- Gina Whitfield
As I lay in bed thinking about the article for the Advent Devotional, I found myself remembering the many past Christmas holidays and family times spent preparing for this holiday.

As a family, there was just Mom, Dad, my sister Kay, and I. Each of us had particular jobs to do.

Dad and I always decorated the tree. My father would place each icicle on the tree, one at a time, and I had to do the same for the lower branches. Mom and Kay would be in the kitchen making candy. Icicles required too much patience for them.

Each year, Mom and I would save a favorite Christmas card from a previous year, and I would paint the scene on our picture window in the living room. At the end of the day, all of us would sit and marvel at the transformation of our home by this Christmas spirit. None of our efforts required much money, just time and "togetherness."

Today, I do not remember the presents that we eagerly unwrapped on those early Christmas mornings past. I do remember my father saying we could not dash for the tree until we had our slippers and robes and he checked to see that Santa wasn't still at work. (You see, we always were awake by 6:00 a.m.). Secretly, I think Dad just wanted to get to the tree first, in his excitement. That day he was a kid again, too.

The smell of turkey cooking always reminds me of those Christmas days at home, when mom would spread our table with our favorite holiday foods. If she added a new recipe, we were all extra critical, because you never ate Christmas dinner without certain delicacies, and to substitute she risked a chorus of disappointment. She would never let us down on Christmas.

As the years pass, and my own family grows and moves away from home, Christmas will be a "Homecoming" because of their memories. The warm feelings of belonging and celebrating call out to us to be a part of our families and to fulfill this deep need not to be alone at Christmas.

How important it is to remember those not as fortunate as we who have families and traditions--to include the lonely and needy in this celebration, too.

Isn't it a miracle that Advent, the preparing for the Ultimate Homecoming by those early Christians has been passed, generation to generation, by not only "doing" but by "remembering!" Our scriptures are the Holy Spirit working through people remembering and telling the story--spreading the Word.

This Advent season, prepare for it by reading again the Christmas story, by remembering the warmth and love of families together celebrating, and by including others in need in some way this season.

- Ann Todd
Wednesday, December 10

Matthew 2:1,2 and 9 -11

"Come thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free .."

Two years ago, I became a grandmother for the first time and lost my father both within the space of a month. The conflicting emotions associated with life beginning and passing were both vividly felt. The presence of a newborn at the gathering of friends and family at my father's funeral served to somewhat relieve the sense of loss that cannot be escaped even with the assurance felt at the passing of a loved one who lived a life of dedication to God. It is difficult for most of us to contain feelings of joy and delight in the company of a baby or small child for there is embodied all the hope and expectation of life at its beginning - a clean slate with potential for all the things that God has created human beings to be.

At Christmas, when we have a chance to focus on our Lord's birth, I think it is significant that God in His great love gave Jesus to us as a human baby - physically helpless and dependent on his earthly parents just as we all were, yet able to evoke strong emotions of hope, joy, and expectation that were so wondrously fulfilled in His later life. Those who lived in that age and were in tune with God knew it would be so - from the shepherds to the wise men, they came to kneel and worship a baby who was God's greatest and most priceless gift to the world. How fortunate we are to be able to approach Christmas with the sure knowledge that the anticipation of Jesus' birth and the feelings of joy and hope which arise from the image of the tiny Christ Child in the manager were perfectly realized for all generations in life of God's son.

Prayer: Dear God, Thank you for allowing us to be a part of the experience of Jesus' birth as well as His ministry. May we use it as an example of how You begin life with hope and enable us to continue in hope as You give us the grace to grow. In the name of Jesus who is our perfect Hope. Amen.

- Norma Webb
Thursday, December 11

Infant Holy, Infant Lowly, 
for His bed a cattle stall, 
oxen lowing, little knowing 
Christ the babe is lord of all.

Cast your cares on the Lord 
Cast your cares on the Lord 
Cast your cares on the Lord 
and he will sustain you.

We shudder when we think that Jesus was born in a stable. It stinks in a stable: urine, cow chips 
and unwashed animals. Barns aren’t much on heat and air, either. (Shut that door! Were you 
raised in a barn?) But there’s something right about it...

First, Christ is our divine burden-bearer. Just like we would use an ox or a camel to shoulder a 
load that we cannot, Jesus carries that which our weak frames cannot. Mind hurt? Soul weary? 
Pack ‘em on! It is Jesus who plows ahead of us in our walk.

The first words of John the Baptist in the Gospel of John were: Behold the Lamb of God! Just as 
God provided a ram as a sacrifice in place of Isaac, Jesus was provided in our place.

Besides, what palace could contain the glory? What temple or pyramid or fortress carved by 
human hands is noble enough a place? Aren’t we just a little naive to think that there would be 
any way that we could ennoble his birth? What doctor would say, “I delivered the Son of God,” 
without unhealthy pride?

It may grieve us, but God did His work His way. It was just as it should have been.
They came a long way to see the place where the star rested. These wise men had studied long and hard, had watched the skies for the great celestial event that they were now witnessing.

This sign, this portent, signified that a momentous occasion had taken place, and they were anxious to be first hand witnesses to that event.

They packed their camels with great care. Taking food, water and provisions for their long trip, they also carried with them precious gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, symbols of kingship, divinity and anointing. These precious gifts, such gifts as one would give to a king, were to be presented to the child found in the place above which the star rested.

Tradition says that these wise men arrived at the child's birthplace on the night on which the child was born. Did they arrive that night, or, as some say, several months later? Does it really? What matters is that these men knew that the events predicted by the arrival of the star would change the course of human history. They acted in faith, in obedience to the urgings of God to go and present these gifts to that child.

What they found when they arrived at the star's resting place may have surprised them. They may have expected that the child would have been born in a palace instead of a stable. They may have expected a king and queen to be the parents of this spectacularly-omened child instead of a humble carpenter and his teenaged wife.

Whatever their expectations, they knew that they had celebrated the most important birth ever recorded in history. They had witnessed the birth of God in human. They had been in the very Presence of God, and they were humbled by it. These wise men had, by the time they left to return home, realized that they were the ones who had received the greatest gift. Not like the expensive gifts they had brought the Christ Child, but the gift of being in the Presence of God, a gift they could not buy or barter, sell or trade, but an eternal gift.

Was the star a conjunction of two or more planets, as speculated upon by astronomers, or a cosmic event created just for the purpose of leading people to the birthplace of God on earth? Why not both?

This star was the focal point of a journey. Let its light be the focal point to lead us to Christ Jesus in this Christmas Season of 1996. Let us, bring our gifts, no matter what they are, to the Christ Child. Let us, like the wise men, kneel in awe at the cradle of our Lord, and let us always remember that this is the real reason for Christmas.

- Weston Taylor
Saturday, December 13

“If ye love me, keep my commandments.”
John 14:15

I want to be God’s dog.

I’ve looked at the situation in my own house, and I’ve decided I want to be God’s dog. We have two cats and a half-breed mutt, so I know. I’ve watched dogs, and it’s incredible what they’re capable of, especially if you see a dog that’s been well-trained.

I think the problem is that I’m God’s cat, at heart. Smokey, my cat, does what he wants to, when he wants to, like he wants to. He hangs around because I feed him, otherwise he comes and goes as he pleases. If I didn’t feed him regularly, I suspect that he’d pick out other accommodations. He wants food. He wants a cozy box to curl up in, so he doesn’t have to be bothered with the outside world. He won’t tolerate getting wet, cold or having his fur stroked backwards. In the final analysis, eats aren’t of very much real use.

Dogs are good for hunting stuff out. They’re good for watching sheep. They’ll get the paper, the slippers or their own leash. They watch, and protect their homes. They are faithful, even to death. They come looking for you, not because they want anything, but just to be close.

I love watching a K-9 police dog in action. They are the policeman’s eyes, ears and nose. They are intensely loyal. They’ll take a bullet for their master. Some of what the dog does is because of the nature of the dog, but a lot comes from the training that the master gives a dog.

If I’m willing to watch out for my own dog, (take her to the vet, bathe her, feed her, give her attention,) I wonder what God would do for His own dog? If he’d do it for His dog, what would he do for his child?

Romans 8: 15 ... but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with [him], that we may be also glorified together. For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time [are] not worthy [to be compared] with the glory which shall be revealed in us.
What do you think of when you hear the word, "gifts"? Do you visualize colorful, wrapped packages waiting for you to open them? Perhaps you think of the annual challenge of getting the "right gift" for the "right person." Regardless of what our first thought may be where there is a gift there must be both a giver and a receiver.

At Christmas time Christians celebrate the giving of the "Best Gift," Jesus, by the "Best Giver," our Heavenly Father, to the "Receiver," the undeserving family of mankind. When you receive Jesus as your personal savior into your heart and mind, then you also become a member of the family of God. Then you can receive all kinds of wonderful gifts. This makes me think of the Christmas of 1978.

In 1978, my wife and I and my four children lived just outside the small village of Dryden, in the Finger Lakes region of New York state. Our home was on a hillside overlooking a valley. The family room window offered a panoramic view of gentle rolling hills. Since Christmas has always been a family affair, we eagerly looked forward to the arrival of our brother, sisters and parents from Florida, North Carolina and New Jersey. Our children also looked forward to playing with their cousins, and being spoiled by their generous uncle, aunts and grandparents.

Because of the long distances, the heavy holiday traffic, and the uncertain road conditions in the northern climate, we asked our church to join us in prayer for safe travel for our relatives. Our Florida nieces also prayed for snow. They loved a white Christmas with snowmen, snowballs and snow-angels.

My wife has the wonderful knack of making our home into a warm haven for our guests; they enjoy coming as much as we enjoy having them. She is an excellent hostess, providing individualized comforts for each guest and providing an attentive, listening ear. Our traditional Christmas preparations include decorating the tree, setting the nativity scene, hanging stockings on the mantel, lighting the Advent candles and making different cookies, especially gingerbread men.

On Christmas Eve, our last guest arrived. Everyone helped unload the car and put the gaily-wrapped presents under the tree. The floor had disappeared under the boxes, and presents were piled against the walls. After supper, the last-minute stocking-stuffers were noisily wrapped behind closed doors, amid laughter and joking over name tags. Then, everyone gathered in the family room to enjoy the warmth from the fireplace, the soft glow of tree lights, and the relaxing music of traditional carols.

About an hour or two later the relaxed atmosphere was broken when one of the children shouted, "Look! It's snowing!" So it was! Big, soft, wet flakes were silently falling straight down. Usually on our hillside there was a strong wind that blew the snow sideways, leaving large bare patches on the ground. Maybe it would be a White Christmas. But then, it was time for bed.

Christmas Day dawned bright, white and beautiful. Eight inches of sparkling snow blanketed everything outdoors. Inside the family room, amidst the fun of savoring stocking stuffers, everything was blanketed with an invisible covering of family love. Yet upon reflection, the best gifts were not found in stockings or boxes, but were God's:

- Gift of answered prayers for safe travel and snow
- Inner peace with Him and family
- Family traditions shared and passed on
- Teaching that He hears and responds to His children
- Showing us His loving kindness and grace.

What "GIFTS" will you be thankful for this season that won't be found in a stocking or a box?

- Gary L. Schneggenburger
Monday, December 15

Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.
Proverbs 22:6

Anticipation. We've all felt it. When we have something to look forward to -- an event, a particular date, we eagerly await the coming of that date. We develop in our minds wonderful things that will happen or be associated with that event. Sometimes the real thing doesn't live up to our buildup.

Brett recently experienced anticipation. He's in the third grade and has eagerly awaited his Bible, given as a gift from his church. I don't know how many Sundays I checked the bulletin for him only to tell him, no it wasn't this Sunday. Postponing gratification is a very difficult thing when you're 8 years old. Finally, he got word that the next Sunday was it!

He dressed in new clothes that Sunday. He was waiting with his class on the front pew of the sanctuary when I entered that day. He eagerly raced to tell me that he had to sit up front with the others until the presentation.

When it finally came, he stood with two other 8-year-olds, all looking nervous to be standing before the entire congregation, to receive their Bibles. Maybe they couldn't show it openly, but when he returned to the pew to us, he proudly showed his new Bible, with his name, its maps, drawings and the red words of Jesus. I think the real event lived up to his expectations.

Brett probably saw the presentation of his Bible as a rite of passage -- a symbol that he's growing up. He also saw it as something Jessica had already done, therefore he needed to do it too!

But for me, and hopefully for all our church, it's a recognition that these children are now of an age that they can begin to truly learn from God's word. The responsibility on my shoulders seems a little heavier today than it did yesterday. Probably the theological questions that I can't answer are just around the corner. But nevertheless I watch the coming days with anticipation for his spiritual growth. If I've felt such pride and accomplishment in his physical, mental and emotional growth, how much more should I take pride in his knowledge and understanding of Jesus?

We're in a great time of anticipation. These days can easily be overwhelming if we allow the "anticipation" to get out of hand. Usually that happens when our focus is on a worldly Christmas, rather than a Godly one. May we make a conscious effort this Christmas to keep the "Christ" very much in all our holiday celebrations, and to help our children anticipate a Christmas full of God's love shared with family, friends and the less fortunate in our community and world.

If our focus is on keeping Christ in our celebrations, our season will live up to our every anticipation.

- Janet Dennis
The Christmas season is upon us. With it comes the trappings and tinsel of our modern society. Even the most devout of us as Christians find it hard to focus on what the celebration of Christmas is really about - the birth of Jesus. Next to Easter, this is the most significant of Christian holidays. But should it really be that significant?

Was the birth of Jesus really special? The answer is - of course! Jesus was meant to be special and he was from the very beginning. His conception by the Holy Spirit set him apart from any other birth in history, just as his life did. His birth by a virgin was predicted generations earlier in Isaiah 7: 13-15. Angels celebrated his birth (Luke 2:8-14) and wise men followed his star to worship him (Matthew 2: 1-12). People such as Simeon and the prophetess Anna had long awaited that day the savior would be born.

Yes Jesus' birth was a very special occurrence in history. It marked the beginning of a new covenant with God's people. The scriptures were fulfilled and the world had its long-awaited savior. This is truly cause for great celebration! Jesus was far more than just another "good man" in history. Yes, we celebrate the birthdays of other great men: George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr. But, none compare with the virgin birth of Jesus. Those of us who have had children can remember the incredible joy of those days. Can you imagine God's joy at witnessing the birth of His only Son?

Christmas should be a time of great joy and celebration for all Christians. As we fight through the other aspects of Christmas that our modern society has tacked on, we should try not to forget what really happened that wonderful day almost 2000 years ago and what it meant. Next to the resurrection of Jesus, it was the most important day in history.

- Dave Lewis.
Wednesday, December 17

So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

Matthew 1:17, NRSV.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Mark 1:2-8, NRSV.

What furor and excitement! The long awaited promise of a Messiah is at hand. John the Baptist proclaims: Get yourselves ready; Repent! Examine yourself. Are you ready to receive this Savior into your hearts?

The hearers of John’s message streamed from the great city of Jerusalem and hillside villages to do as John commanded. They were hungry for change—for themselves, their families and communities, as well as for the established church of the day. They wanted to be ready to meet the fulfillment of the long-ago prophecy.

However, John exhorts them that they have lots of work to do and not much time! They need to clear away the obstacles that keep their hearts from a life-changing, soul-saving encounter with the Lord whose arrival is imminent. Isn’t there a message here for us as well? As we make our preparations for this bustling holiday season, will we hear “the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight”? Will we allow the sound of this voice to rise above the tumult of crowds and the noisy intrusions of frantic activity and truly prepare our hearts to receive the baby Jesus and be baptized, not just by water but also by the Holy Spirit? I pray that I will ... that so will we all!! Amen.

Submitted by Barbara George
Thursday, December 18

*Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel (which means God with us.)*  
Matthew 1:23

As Matthew relates the story, Joseph and Mary were engaged, and were faithful to the customs of their culture by vowing not to be together during the year of their betrothal. Then Mary apparently told Joseph of the angel's visit and declaration that she would conceive and bear a son, whom she was to name Jesus, and he would become the savior of his people from their sins. Well, being human and faithful to his vows, Joseph felt betrayed and obviously doubted

Mary’s story, for he planned to divorce her quietly. Then the angel brought his message to Joseph, while Joseph slept, that Mary had indeed been visited by the Holy Spirit and would bear a son, God's child and his name would be EMMANUEL, God with us. If anyone in the history of the Bible, or more pertinently, the 2,000 years of the Christian experience, ever had to accept the thought of "God with us," it was Mary and Joseph. Mary's aunt, Elizabeth, had been hiding her pregnancy, another miracle, for six months. Her husband, Zechariah, had been struck dumb by the angel Gabriel because Zechariah doubted the angel from the beginning. So, in the face of their peers, probably some of their family members and the neighborhood, Mary and Joseph had to accept and believe God's presence with them beyond credib belief. Elizabeth had to become their faithful confidant, and they, hers. What stories had to be told at her kitchen table.

Of course, you know the rest of the story, and that we celebrate the birth of Jesus and worship our risen savior joyfully and gratefully.

But the meaning of this story to me is that to have God with us, we must accept Him into our lives every day, all day. In the most joyful or difficult circumstances He is there for us, if we'll have Him.

This Christ, make the time to meditate, to pray, to talk to God or Jesus, or the Holy Spirit, to feel the power of the presence and comfort of knowing the love of a constant companion. Let's think of angels and feel the flutter of wings. Let's accept God into our lives, however, and wherever we are.

- Bill Morrow
Friday, December 19

This is love; not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love on another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

1 John 4:10-12

One of my favorite Bible stories is contained in the Book of Esther. Esther was not only a very beautiful woman, she was also selected by King Xerxes to be his Queen. But Queen Esther had a secret. On the advice of her uncle, she was not to tell anyone she was Jewish. The King's minister, however, had Xerxes sign a decree that all of the Jews should die. Esther risked not only her position as Queen, but her own life in order to save her people.

Esther and all the Jews in Susa fasted and prayed for three days before she unlawfully sought the King's counsel. (In those days a person could be executed for coming before the King without being summoned). God protected Esther and her people, and destroyed those who tried to kill them. Read the short book of Esther to find out all the details of how the Queen proved to be a type and picture of Christ — how she was willing to sacrifice herself to save her people. just as Christ chose to sacrifice himself for us.

Every Christian is given the ability to love one another, but God also gives us the choice on whether to reveal His love. I challenge you. during this Advent season. to show Christ to others through acts of selfless Christian love.

- Bonnie Walls
Saturday, December 20

That night in all of heaven, there was not a sound As God and the angels watched the Earth. For there in a stable, the Father's only Son chose to give Himself in human birth. And when the cry of a baby pierced the universe, Once for all men were shown their worth. And the heavens exploded with music everywhere And the angels spilled over heaven's edge and filled the air And the Father rejoiced for He did not lose His son, But He gained to Himself forever those who'd come.

My family has a tradition of attending Christmas' Eve communion service together when we're all in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, my home town. Often, on those occasions, my sister and I have sung with our parents in the chancel choir. Looking out over the congregation, I see many dear friends that I have known all my life. As I make my pilgrimage to the place of my spiritual roots, there is a warm feeling of unity as we all kneel to receive the elements of the Lord's Supper.

The words above are to a song that we have sung to close the service. In my heart, I can hear the piercing cry of the newborn Christ telling me of God's love for me. My mind's eye can imagine the sky filled with angels singing glory to God, and I want to join their song. It is then that I truly feel I'm home. As we share hugs, smiles and kisses to wish each other merry Christmas, I know I have found the joy of belonging to God's family. God has shown me my worth in the arrival of a tiny baby born long ago, and gave us each other to make sure we get the message.

Prayer: Dear God, The cry of the Christ Child is still being heard today. Help us to understand that His is not a cry of accusation, but of invitation, to join in the greatest family of all—yours.

- Melynn Canova
Sunday, December 21

Matthew 1:18-21 and 2:7-12

In each of these passages, there is an important decision to be made by the subjects. In the first, Joseph must decide whether or not to break off his engagement with Mary; in the second, the three men from the east have to decide to return to Herod or not. Each subject originally decided to do what was right according to either their society’s traditions or their king’s orders.

Due to God’s intervention, however, the minds are changed. God sends an angel to Joseph, and convinces him that he should trust in God and get married to Mary. God also warns the wise men, via a dream, not to return to Herod.

These passages help to remind me that what God wishes and what society demands are not always in agreement. Sometimes, God wants us to make certain decisions and we must be ready to listen to Him and act accordingly. It is up to each of us to examine the decisions we must make, and think: “What would Jesus do?”

Prayer: Lord, help me to recognize your intervention in my life, and help me to make decisions that glorify you.

- Aaron George
Monday, December 22

I remember as a child looking forward to Christmas SO much - the anticipation of the presents would just about kill me. When I had children of my own, those memories came back full-force and I was appalled by the "gimme" attitude that they quickly fell into. I so wanted them to understand the TRUE meaning of Christmas: that it was more important to give than to receive. But with the commercialization of Christmas and the TV ads which con children into begging and pleading for extravagant and expensive toys, it was difficult to get the message across.

Three years ago, when Jessica was five and Brett was three, I was reading the Christmas Connection articles and noticed how many children were part of a family that would not waken to many (or perhaps ANY) presents on Christmas morning. I vowed that year to try to help my children understand about giving.

We headed to the toy store and I told them that they could pick out a present that they would love to receive (not extravagant or pricey), and we would take the toys to the Christmas Connection receiving center. That first year, Jessica chose a beautiful Barbie doll, and Brett picked out a car. They proudly walked into the Christmas Connection office and handed over the toys and asked the person on duty to make sure that this toy got into the hands of a boy or girl who might not get much for Christmas.

It's become an annual Christmas tradition now. The kids expect to select a neat toy to give to some boy or girl whose parents can't afford to make their Christmas an overly bright one. I get such a blessing each time I watch them giving in the spirit of the season. I hope that this Christmas tradition will have a very long life in our family.

- Janet Dennis
Tuesday, December 23

For God so loved the world. 

John 3:16

Each year at Advent now I get out my copy of KNEELING IN BETHLEHEM before I get the boxes labeled "Christmas" from the attic. Reading this book of poetry by Ann Weems is my way of preparing. It helps me center on the meaning behind all this rushing around to buy gifts, attend parties, and extra choir practice. Let me share one of the poems to help you understand why.

THE CHILD IS BORN AGAIN:

Each year the Child is born again. 
Each year some new heart, finally hears, 
finally sees finally knows love. 
And in heaven, there is great rejoicing I 
There is a festival of stars! 
There is celebration among the angels! 
For in the finding of one lost sheep, 
the heart of the Shepherd is glad, and 
Christmas has happened once more. 
The Child is born anew, and one more knee is bowed!

-Ann Weems

There is new joy each year. Christmas is not just an event that happened 2000 years ago. Because Jesus gave away his life we have salvation – forever. That gift will be opened anew this year by someone. Glory!

The last poem in the book, "Boxed" is to be read when you put away the manger set. You must take care not to box away the peace, joy and good will with the figurines. This special book is available in bookstores and UMC Service Center catalog. I found it first on Judy Denham’s coffee table.

Prayer: God who loved us first. Help us to experience again the joy, love, peace and good will of this season. Help us to keep that spirit alive and at the center of our family, friends and fellow worker celebrations. And, with the aid of the Holy Spirit let us pass on the gift of grace to someone who doesn’t understand our joy. Amen.

- Cindy Cosper
Christmas Eve, Wednesday, December 24

Before the cathedral in grandeur rose
At Ingelburg where the Danube goes;
Before its forest of silver spires
Went airly up to the clouds and fires;
Before the oak had ready a beam
While yet the arch and stone and dream -
There where the altar was later laid,
Conrad, the cobbler, plied his trade.

It happened one day at the year's white end -
Two neighbors called on their old time friend
And they found the shop, so mean and meager
Made gay with a hundred boughs of green.
Conrad was stitching with face ashine,
But suddenly stopped as he twitched a twine;
"Old friends, good news! At dawn today,
As the cocks were scaring the night away,
The Lord appeared in a dream to me,
And said, "I am coming your Guest to be!"
So I've been busy with feet astir,
Strewing the floor with branches of fir.
The wall is washed and the shelf is shined,
And over the rafter the holly twined.
He comes today, and the table is spread
With milk and honey and wheaten bread."

His friends went home; and his face grew still
As he watched for the shadow across the sill.
He lived all the moments o'er,
When the Lord should enter the lowly door -
The knock, the call, the latch pulled up,
The lighted face, the offered cup.
He would wash the feet where
The spikes had been
He would kiss the hands where
The nails went in;
And then at last would sit with Him
And break the bread as the day grew dim.
While the cobbler mused
There passed his pane
A beggar drenched by the driving rain.
He called him in from the stormy street
And gave him shoes for his bruised feet.
The beggar went and there came a crone,
Her face with wrinkles of sorrow sown.
A bundle of fagots bowed her back,
And she was spent with the wrench and rack.
He gave her the loaf and steadied her load
As she took her way on the weary road.
Then to his door came a little child,
Lost and afraid in the big, dark world.
Catching it up,
He gave it milk in the waiting cup,
And led it home to its mother's arms.
Our of the reach of the world's alarms.

The day went down in the crimson west
And with it the hope of the blessed Guest,
And Conrad sighed as the world turned grey:
"Why is it Lord, that your feet delay?"
Did You forget that this was the day?"
Then soft in the silence a Voice he heard:
"Lift up you heart, for I have kept my word."
Three times I came to your friendly door;
Three times my shadow was on your floor.
I was the beggar with bruised feet;
I was the woman you gave to eat;
I was the child on the homeless street!"

-May we make our journey to the cradle of the Christ-child. With our gifts that will make our Savior well-pleased. With a glory that brings peace on earth and goodwill to men. Amen.
- Edwin Markham

- Julius Hawkins
Christmas Day, Thursday, December 25, 2008

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

Titus 2:11-14

So, did it come?

Advent has been about the coming of Jesus. On Christmas we remember his first coming, with shepherds and angels and magi and a baby in a manger. But we anticipate also another coming. Remember the Isaiah reading for the First Sunday in Advent?

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence--as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil--to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!

We hope – in Advent and in all of our lives – for the intervention of God in a troubled and hurting world.

So did it come?

Maybe we're looking for some big event, some decisive cataclysm, when God brings in the Kingdom in its fullness. But even our beloved Christmas story doesn't work like that. Instead, an unimportant couple in the backwaters of the Roman Empire brings a baby to birth, swaddling him and placing him in a feed trough because no other place is available. Magi come seeking him and bringing expensive gifts, but no one in the story seems to know what to make of them.

Yet Christians believe that the world tilted at the birth of Emmanuel, God-with-us. Is it possible that something important happened this Christmas, too?

The letter to Titus claims that grace and salvation have appeared, redeeming us from iniquity and purifying us as a people of good deeds. Did it happen this year? Did it happen to you?

O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray; cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell; O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel!

- Phillips Brooks, 1868

- Rev. Ron McCreary