

A Savior  
For  
All



*November*  
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### **Carry Advent Through the Year**

Advent is the beginning of one of the most Joyous seasons in the church. It is the time when we prepare our hearts for the birth of Jesus. It's easier to be kind during this season, it's easier to remember the love God sent to us during this season. But how do we take that feeling through out the year? How do we bottle, capture, hold close the love that came the first Christmas night.

The day to day of life can get so overwhelming that our focus gets diverted to those little things. Work, family, friends, hobbies, kids activities, homework, illness, \_\_\_\_\_ fill in your blank, what pulls at your time and energy? And then when do we set aside time for prayer and listening to God? All this adds more to our plate and we can get more stressed which again takes our focus off of God.

In Proverbs 16:3 is says to “Commit your work to the Lord, and your plans will be established.” Or put into other words when we have our priorities in the right order everything else falls into place. Even Peter, when he stepped out of the boat, walked on water, it was when he took his eyes off Jesus and focused on the storm that he started to sink.

What keeps you focused on God during this Advent and Christmas season, is it a song, the lights, a nativity, or something else? Why can't we hold on to this all year? Leave a nativity set up in your house or office as a reminder of God's love. Play the Christmas music loud and sing in the car. God's love is not just one time a year, we are to carry that love all year long, how we do that is up to us.

By Suzy Broadus

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### **Prepare Ye the Way**

Mark 1:1-4

“It’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas” is a song written in 1951 by Meredith Wilson. It has been recorded by many artists. The most famous was by Bing Crosby in 1951, but was also recorded by Perry Como, the Andrews Sisters, and most recently Michael Bublé. It has been a favorite of many people over the years.

I thought of that song and how it might represent this season of advent. This is supposed to be a time of preparing for the coming of the Lord. It is a time for preparation for the coming. Time to get right for God. I am sitting here during September looking at what is going on here at Union United Methodist Church. I see new Disciple Bible Studies beginning; new youth activities starting; great participation in Bible Studies and new classes starting. There are all kinds of activities here that are starting as we see our way through this time of confusion caused by pandemics, world events, and even the current political division in this country. People are looking. People are preparing the way for Christmas.

With all this looking toward God, I truly believe that this is a time of preparation for the coming of Christ. So, I can sing along with Bing, Michael and others, “It’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas...”

By David Anderson

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### **Garbage Truck**

This morning driving to work in the pouring rain I got behind...of all things... a garbage truck. Sighing and doing my best to keep my distance, I slowed down so nothing would splash on my car from the garbage truck. As I slowed down, I noticed something on the back of the truck. What was it? It was shiny and yellow. As I inched closer, it looked like a person sitting on the back of the truck, in the pouring rain. Finally I realized that it was 2 men in their raincoats and rain hats with water literally running off of them in sheets.

The man on the right side of the back of the truck had something in his hands. Being curious, I slowly eased up closer. The truck started to move, and this garbage truck worker, sitting on the back of the truck, in the pouring rain, held up two pinwheels. One in each hand, with a huge smile on his face. He waved the pinwheels at cars as they passed.

How could I not smile and wave back?

So here, on this gloomy day that I would have much rather stayed in bed, I was smiling at a man I did not know, with 2 pinwheels in his hands seeming to have the time of his life and trying to help me, someone he didn’t know, and may never see again, to have a good day.

This stood out as a reminder to me – Life is what you make of it. You can frown and complain about the nasty, messy weather, OR you can smile, be grateful for the rain and watch the pinwheels make yourself and others smile.

PRAYER: God, while we recognize that the rain puts a damper on outdoor activities and maybe even our moods, we know how much our gardens and flowers depend on the rain to survive and make our world a more beautiful and better place. So, please help us remember to see the good in things, forgive us when we don’t, and know that we give you the glory for all things. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen

By Susan Vinson

**Christmas all over the World**

Could we really be moving to the Middle East, I thought to myself as I packed up what was left of my belongings into the eight oversized luggage carriers. As if selling our belongings wasn't enough of a shock to the system, we decided to move to a Muslim country with no friends or family to turn to. Many people asked us why, even my mother demanded that we not go. We went, because I sat in church one Sunday and said, "God tell me what to do, please guide and direct my path. Amen." It was after that moment, that I felt at ease, a sudden peace came into my soul and quieted all my fears.

When we arrived in Oman, a tall, thin gentleman in a white dishdasha and colorful kuma, the traditional Omani dress, who was introduced as our Public Relations Officer, greeted us. He was very kind, had a great sense of humor, and soon after he became one of our closest friends. He was eager to show my husband and me around Oman. It was a beautiful country. One of the first places that he showed us was where the protestant Church was located. He knew that it would help us to feel more at home to see we were welcome to worship God. There were many different Christian services in numerous languages, some we could hear the music and worship from miles away. I was amazed to see so many people from many nationalities come together and worship.

Before the start of the Holiday season, I had asked our friend if we would be able to find a Christmas tree and lights, because I had sold all of our decorations. His response was, "Why not? You will see how it is." Sure enough, he was right. On November 18th, Oman celebrates National Day and luckily for us, the national colors are green, red and white. For two weeks before December, the whole country is decorated beautifully in those colors. Shortly after National Day, decorations are taken down and all of the Christmas decorations are hung in the malls and real trees and decorations are ready for purchase. You see, the Sultan really cares for not only Omanis; he truly cares for those who spend time in Oman. Just like God's love, it is not only meant for friends and family, but for everyone in the world.

I will never forget our first Christmas in Oman. Down the street from where we lived, there were laborers from Pakistan and India, working to build a home for an Omani family. They choose to send most of their income back to their families in their home country. To celebrate the birth of Jesus, these workers added a decorative Christmas star to the top of their housing. It was so simple, yet so heartwarming. My husband and I were so touched that we decided to gather some food for them, so that they could have a Christmas meal. I am thankful for the way that God showed me that He is everywhere; He truly is a Savior for all.

**Finding God in the Kitchen**

"Dear woman, why are you crying?" Jesus asked her [Mary Magdalene]. "Who are you looking for?" She thought he was the gardener. – John 20:15

This may not be part of the "Christmas Story," but while I was trying to think of scripture that illuminates how we find God in unexpected places, John 20:15 sprang to mind. In my experience, earnestly seeking God always results in some sort of "God thing." Sometimes that thing, moment, event, is spectacular. Sometimes it's easy to miss. 2 Chronicles 15:2 says, "Whenever you seek Him, you will find Him" but for me, and perhaps for you too, it's rarely where, when, or how I expect.

When my grandfather (Pop) was a teenager, his family was very poor. Pop had saved enough money to go on a date and was excited to go home to get dressed. That morning, he laid his only dress shirt on the back of a kitchen chair. When he got home, his shirt was nowhere to be found.

Now, my great-grandfather was a Baptist minister in a small Texas town, so people came to his home for all sorts of things. When Pop asked about his shirt, Granddaddy said a homeless man came to the house for help because he had no money for food or clothing. He didn't even have a shirt, so Granddaddy gave him Pop's. Pop was understandably upset, but Granddaddy just calmly said "That poor man needed the shirt more than you do, and it was all I had to give him." As they were talking there was another knock at the door. Granddaddy opened it and there was the owner of the general store. He had a stack of new shirts in his arms and said that he just felt like he needed to bring them to the pastor's house, perhaps he would know someone who needed a shirt. I doubt that Pop expected to find God in his kitchen that day, but there he was.

I'll never forget Pop telling me that story. It may seem simple, but to me it illustrates how God is always at work in our lives. If God is with us in the small things, how much more present is God in the big things? More than we could ever dream or imagine. We just need to pay attention. In other words, when God shows up in your life, try not to mistake him for the gardener.

God of the great, and God of the small, help us to pay attention to the myriad ways in which you are at work in our lives and in our world. We are grateful and humbled by your endless love and care. Amen.

By Don Kirkindoll

## December 3

### I need a silent night

How many of us feel the rush and chaos of the season? With all that is going on in our world right now, we look for the joy and peace that can come with Christmas and the birth of Jesus. Music can provide comfort and reflection when it feels like nothing else can. Christmas music is my most favorite, from the sacred hymns we sing in church to the secular silly songs.

One Christmas song that has become so meaningful is sung by Amy Grant and called, "I Need a Silent Night." If you haven't listened to the lyrics, I challenge you to take a moment out of your day to hear it's message.

The song starts with:

"I've made the same mistake before  
Children are crying while mothers are trying  
Too many malls, too many stores  
To photograph Santa and sleigh  
December traffic, Christmas rush  
The shopping and buying and standing forever in line  
It breaks me till I push and shove  
What can I say?  
I need a silent night, a holy night  
To hear an angel voice through the chaos and the noise  
I need a midnight clear, a little peace right here  
To end this crazy day with a silent night"

When I hear this song it reminds me that the night Jesus was born was far from normal or quiet. But in the midst of all that chaos came so much love and so much joy. God still gives us that love and joy today!

By Suzy Broadus

## December 4

### The Greatest Gift

"But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift."

Ephesians 4:7

When you hear the word "grace" what is the first thought that comes to your mind? Do you think of the grace that Jesus brought to us – all of us as sinners when he was beaten, nailed to a cross, and died? Or do you think of "fleshly grace," which is often conditional and based on our own personal expectations, opinions, and standards of how we "believe" something should be handled, judged, or forgiven? Selah (pause). Let us "pause" for a moment to take in God's gift of grace. We quickly move into the season of Christmas each year. I often visualize the gift of baby Jesus under my tree. He was more than just a gift; He is a life full of grace and mercy that I can never earn or deserve. I am human, I have been quick to judge by my own standards and expectations. I am so grateful that I have seen God's grace through people that love me, meet me where I am, encourage me to keep my chin up, and to keep moving forward. The gift of someone giving love and forgiveness beyond my mistakes and transgressions – that is where I see God's grace! Sincere gifts of unconditional love and forgiveness are truly the greatest gifts we could ever pass on to each other – gifts that can never be purchased!

In Jesus name, Amen.

By Barbara Tanner

## December 5

### Taking time to Reflect

As the Advent season approaches it always seems to come with mixed emotions. Excitement and nostalgia are two that come to mind, but let's get real, at this point in life, stress and anxiety fall right in line behind them. It is so easy to get wrapped up in all the things that make this time of year so magical for everyone, especially the children. Do not get me wrong, I cherish all the little moments of baking cookies, decorating the tree, and all the little parties here and there. However, every year I seem to be brought back to the reason for this season by none other than the very children for whom I'm running around like crazy. Each year I love to see our children of Union get so excited to participate in The Living Christmas Story, The Living Nativity, or any other area where they can be a part of the story. They have so much anticipation waiting to see what character they are going to be chosen for, not to mention the pride they take in serving in those roles. So, if the children and youth are so happy and content to serve in these roles, and they look forward to it each year, what are we adults doing? We are busy creating the chaos that's circling around them, aren't we? My hope for us this year, very much including myself, is that we reflect on the recent times when we were forced to slow down and maybe insert a little of that into our Advent season. I pray for my family and for yours that we can all look at our season of Advent at Union as a time and opportunity to watch and learn from our kids. We are all His children, and we are never too old to anticipate and celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior!

By Michelle Cochcroft

## December 6

### For by grace you have been saved

"For by grace you have been saved, through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."  
Ephesians 2:8-9

As Christians, many of us often find ourselves not feeling "good enough" - Or perhaps even condemning others in this way. We hold on to our past transgressions, we fret over not doing enough good works, we wrestle with whether someone else's sin is greater than our own. Whatever the situation, we often struggle to truly believe that the grace of Jesus covers each and every one of us - no matter what.

But here's the reality: Christ's death on the cross is the very revelation of His grace. It is the means of grace, the measure of grace and the motivation of grace. Because Jesus paid the price of death on the cross, we have been freely, eternally, totally and unconditionally redeemed. This means we do not "perform" for God in order to gain his approval, but we live for God out of the endless grace and loving relationship he has given us. Genuine obedience is based on God's unconditional love and acceptance and is our response to his grace. The surrender of our lives in sacrificial service to our Redeemer is the result of the open-hearted gratitude that we express to God for what he has done for us. As we focus on the amazing grace of God this season, let us be motivated by grace and focus on learning to value ourselves and others by the measure of Christ's love demonstrated on the cross.

By Eleanor Cannon

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### **Miracle on 34th Street**

Luke 1:30-38 NIV

I'll admit I had never seen the movie *Miracle on 34th Street* until Cindy suggested we watch it one Christmas. It's an American classic released in 1947. It takes place around Christmas at the infamous Macy's department store in New York city. As the plot unfolds, Kris Kringle, the character playing the department store St. Nicholas, sets out to convince everyone that he is really Santa Claus!

Little Susan Walker has been brought up by a skeptical and cynical mother and taught not to believe in fairy tales, much less Santa Claus. Fred Gailey, who plays Susan's mother's romantic interest and a believer in Kris Kringle, tries to convince little Susan of Kris's authenticity by stating "Faith is believing in things when common sense tells you not to."

The Real Christmas! By God's grace we believe that the first Noel happened for us. We believe that our God who miraculously brought Jesus from the virgin womb, also brought Jesus from the tomb. Moreover, we believe the babe once placed in a manger, now sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, to whom praise, honor, and glory are given forever and ever.

The miracle, which takes place in the movie, is the successful redemption of both mother and daughter as they learn to believe in the potency and consequence of what isn't—or at least may not—be real. Yet, OUR faith is perhaps the greatest miracle of Christmas, for it is God's act through the Holy Spirit that enables us to believe that which has been made known to us about Jesus.

By Ned Calvert

### **Capturing the Wonder of Grace**

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Twinkling lights on the tree, sounds of Christmas music, and the aroma of sugar cookies baking in the oven create a calm atmosphere in the home during December. We long for this kind of serenity, but all too often, the reality of life is the opposite. The more common scenario is a busy schedule of school and church activities, frantic buying and wrapping gifts, spending more money than anticipated, and generally feeling overwhelmed with the expectations and details of Christmas. While running out of time and energy, we wonder how we will get everything done.

Children reflect the wonder of the season in their eyes, amazed at the sights, sounds, and stories of the holiday. As we get older, the routines of the season become work. We are responsible for making Christmas happen for our families, for making the celebration memorable.

God revealed His grace to hurting, hopeless people through His greatest gift -- a helpless baby named Jesus. God sought a relationship with us and became one of us. God masterminded the plan for our redemption, bringing world events and the fulfillment of prophecies together at the right time in history. Jesus' birth was wrapped in history and in humanity. When we hold a newborn baby, we are touched by the gentleness of new life. God came as a baby, to soften our hearts to receive a new and transformed life that would be offered to us as Jesus.

God knew the world needed the touch of His grace. He orchestrated history, prophecy, and the sharing of our humanity to bring us the gift of redemption. The revelation of God appearing as a baby is found in Galatians 4:4-5.....  
"But when the set time had fully come" – God's perfect timing in history  
"God sent his Son" – Jesus is divine  
"born of a woman" – Jesus was human  
"born under the law" – Jesus was born into our world  
"to redeem those under the law" – His own purpose.

This child of grace brings the gift of eternal life. Though undeserved, all we need to do is accept this gift of redemption by faith. No work is required on our behalf to earn this relationship with God. Too often we lose sight of the wonder of transformation during Christmas because of the seasonal demands. During the craziness of Christmas preparation, we can allow God to renew our hearts. The wonder of grace and Christmas transformation is illustrated in "A Charlie Brown Christmas". In the Christmas pageant preparation, Charlie Brown is given the task of choosing the tree. He selects the scrawniest one and is criticized by his friend Lucy for such a poor choice. Charlie Brown identified with the lowly tree. In the end, grace is shown when the children decorate and transform it into a beautiful Christmas tree.

God sees us in a similar manner. We come to Him plain and unlovable, be we are made beautiful by His grace. During our busyness, God comes to us right where we are. Only God could have masterminded the world events so that Jesus would be born at the appointed time.

Take time to capture the wonder of grace at Christmas.

By Kathy Horne

## December 9

### Temporary Birth Pains

Childbirth is one of the most rewarding and painful experiences. It usually begins with a slight contraction, which then becomes more intense closer to time of actual childbirth. When the baby is delivered there is a sigh of relief from the mother – the pain is over- but look at the result of her efforts! A beautiful baby has been born.

The bible says our earth experiences and endures a similar form of painful birth. No, not necessarily childbirth, but changes in our world such as wars, famines, earthquakes, and even pandemics. Romans 8:22 states “We know that all that God created has been groaning. It is in pain as if it were giving birth to a child. The created world continues to groan even now.” Even though it seems at times our world will never be the same, the bible tells us that our earthly experiences (or curses as it may feel like at times) are the result of man’s sin and his separation from God. And yes, the pain we suffer is intense.

However, during this time of year we celebrate the birth of Jesus who reconnects us with God who promises in Roman 8:21 and 8:23-24 that “creation itself will be set from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” and “...[we] groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. 24: For in this hope we were saved.”

Can we trust God to bring us through these turbulent times? Romans 32 states “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave Him up for us all—how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things?” Yes, we’re experiencing the pain of earthly woes, but Paul assures us “For our present troubles are small and won’t last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever! So we don’t look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever.” (2nd Corinthians 4)

Prayer: Dear God, we thank you for the birth of your son Jesus who saved us from sin and made a place for us in your kingdom where there is no sadness or pain but only joy. Amen.

By Hannah Majewski

## December 10

### Birthday Message

While visiting my son in Seattle during Christmas Holidays several years ago, I received notification from the VA my appointment to be evaluated for a service-related disability was set for the middle of December. When I called to change the date, I was advised I would go to the bottom of the list, and it could take another two years before I could reschedule. So, I decided to fly into Columbia to keep the original date.

After the evaluation was over, I was headed back to my car when I noticed an unusual packet on the ground and picked it up. It was a small package of tissue. The writing on the front said, “GOD wishes you a Happy Birthday.” Much to my surprise, I realized it was December 13th, my birthday, and I immediately started to cry.

Why? My mind immediately suggested to me it was sent by my youngest son Glenn, who died of cancer some six years earlier. I was unable to stop crying. I told my wife later the passersby must have thought I had gotten some real bad news when, in fact, the opposite was true. Actually, I had received a very special birthday message that meant the world to me. Miracles are everywhere and every day, you only need to open your eyes to them.

By Gerald “Jerry” Callahan

### Unexpected Christmas

In January 2011 my father died unexpectedly. When we got home from his memorial service, we found that our family pet had had a stroke and needed to be put down. So, I buried my dad in the morning and our dog that same afternoon. Six months later my mom died unexpectedly. This was not the year we were expecting.

So, when 2012 rolled around and we made it to the holidays, we were looking forward to a quiet Christmas at home. On Dec. 23rd, my husband, Tim, and I decided to rake the yard and get it looking nice for Christmas. As we worked, Tim began to feel “funny”. We waited a bit but he didn’t improve. I suggested we go to the Irmo Day Hospital just to be checked out. He didn’t want to go because he’d just had a perfect checkup a month before and had promised our youngest son that he would take him hunting that evening. I pressured Tim to go to the Urgent Care and trying to lighten the mood, told him that if it turned out to be nothing that he could go hunting every night for the rest of the year, so he agreed to go.

When we arrived at the Irmo Urgent Care, he was immediately taken to a room where the doctor told us he was having a heart attack. He was rushed to Lexington Medical Center, and the day after Christmas he underwent quadruple bypass. I had already lost both of my parents within 6 months, and I prayed, “Dear God, please don’t take my husband too.”

We spent Christmas Eve and Christmas Day in the hospital. At first, I was mad and thought what a terrible way to spend such an important holiday. But God opened my eyes. We met so many kind and loving people that were in the hospital as well. We saw families celebrating new babies and were treated to delicious food from the cafeteria, which we thought surely would close for the holidays. It didn’t! The hospital staff did all they could to make us feel welcome and loved at this time that they knew we’d rather be at home. As Tim underwent the lengthy surgical procedure where his heart was stopped and restarted, I was blessed to have very dear church members by my side. When I was allowed to go in and see my best friend after surgery, I didn’t have a mom or a dad to be there with me; instead, I had a dear church member hold my hand and walk into ICU to see one of the scariest things I had ever seen! Through this man of God and Christ himself, I was given the strength that day to do many things I never thought I could do.

That Christmas was much different than we ever planned, but it was an eye-opener that Christmas can happen anywhere! We just had to stop and let Jesus be a part of it. After all, it was His birthday!

By Susan Vinson

### The Word was God

John 1:1

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

Twenty some odd years ago, I was on a flight home for Christmas, from New York City to Oklahoma City. As I settled into the flight, a man that was seated next to me was an Orthodox Rabbi. We had a wide-ranging discussion on a variety of topics, but the most earnest part of the conversation evolved from me telling one of my Dad’s favorite stories that he had heard.

“One day, in a courtroom the Judge was preparing to swear in a witness but the bailiff couldn’t find the Bible. The judge thought for a minute, and then asked if anyone in the courtroom was a member of the church down the street. A juror stood up and said that he was. The judge declared that they would swear in on that man, because everyone knew, that members of that church had all memorized the Bible ‘word for word.’”

The Rabbi loved this story, and asked if it was okay if he retold the story in a national newsletter he wrote. I said sure no problem. He went on to say that it amazed him how the word of God is right there for people to read at anytime, and how rarely people actually read it.

Now, twenty years later, it is easier then ever to read scripture at any time or anywhere, on the screens of a multitude of devices. The word is God, and the amazing thing is, that he is always available to us. We, you, I, and all of Mankind are privileged with God’s awesome wisdom and blessings.

May Gods words fill your heart, mind and soul. Amen

By Jeff Lovett

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### **Small Pine**

One of my favorite Christmases was the year I received the children's book "Why Christmas Trees Aren't Perfect" The funny part is that I was a freshman in college. I remember my mom exclaiming, "I can't believe I'm looking for a children's book for my college kid." My mom and dad looked everywhere for this book from South Carolina to Pennsylvania. There was not a copy to be had, until they called a small bookstore on Christmas Eve and finally found it.

"Why Christmas Trees Aren't Perfect" follows a pine tree named Small Pine. All the trees in the forest want to be the royal Christmas tree selected by the queen. They whispered and talked to each other trying to make themselves perfect. Small Pine listened and became the envy of all the others. During the winter season various animals were in need and Small Pine offered shelter in his branches and food from his needles. With all the help he gave, Small Pine did not look so perfect anymore and knew he wouldn't be selected as the royal tree. Surprisingly, when the Queen came to the forest, she recognized all that Small Pine gave to others and truly was the most beautiful tree in the forest!

This story reminds me of the scripture from Romans 12:1

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship."

With all the presents at Christmas I wonder what you will offer as "a living sacrifice" to someone else?

By Suzy Broadus

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### **Withholding Nothing**

"But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet." Acts 5  
A year or so after his death, I was helping my mother go through some of my father's things. We'd opened a box of odds and ends he'd kept and when my Mom lifted out a small stack of coins wrapped in masking tape, my throat constricted.

As a second grader I had insisted I get to buy real presents for my two brothers and two sisters. So, on a shopping trip a couple days before Christmas, my Mom gave me a \$5 bill and turned me loose in the Ben Franklin's 5 & 10 store. I bought my presents and when we got home, I wrapped them myself.

It wasn't until I was placing the presents under the Christmas tree that I realized I hadn't bought anything for my Dad. I agonized over this, until my Mom told me to give what I had left. Thus, I wrapped up the coins and attached a note telling my Dad I loved him and I was sorry but this was all I had.

It seems such a simple thing as a child to give all one has, but as each of us knows, it's tough to do as an adult. When God asks for all our heart, we like to hold part of it back, like Ananias did when he pretended to give his all in the early church.

Christmas is the story of God giving His very best for us, withholding nothing. May it inspire us, at every age, to respond with our all; "Here am I Lord, use me."

Dear God, forgive me for all the times I have withheld from you. Help me to surrender my all to you. Amen.

By Rev. Stephen Taylor

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### **Water at the Well**

One night quite a few years ago, our family was playing a Bible trivia game. It was my turn and the question that I received was: "In Bible times, where did people get their drinking water?" I just knew I had the answer. As my, then 10-year-old, son Andrew read the question, my hand shot up in the air as I made goofy sounds like boys often do in school when they think they know the answer. Rolling his eyes, he looked at me and asked: "ok mom, what's the answer?" With my head held high I replied... "That's so easy, they got their drinking water from lakes and rivers."

Shaking his head, he said "no, mom. Don't you remember The Living Christmas Story? They got their water from the well in town."

Wow – I didn't think my kids were really paying attention. All those years our family helped construct sets, as well as act in many different scenes, in The Living Christmas Story (TLCS) were not wasted or lost. They were watching and listening.

It is important that we all remember that "our" children are watching us and listening to us. Our job as adults is to help them learn about Jesus. The children at Union may not be our biological children, however, they are Union's children and thus are God's children. In Matthew 19:14 Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." Pray for our children this season that they will know where to receive the "Living Water".

By Susan Vinson

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### **Praise him in the dark**

It was a Monday morning unlike any I had ever known. My husband, Eddie, was in the hospital and during this last stay, the grave prognosis of his illness was disclosed. Hospice had been consulted and the arrangements were made. As I got in the elevator, the gravity of the situation hit me, I was bringing my husband home to die. In my mind I told God, I know you are always with me, but right now, I need to feel you. I need you to wrap your arms around me and hold me up. I stepped off the elevator and the unit clerk that I only knew in passing, saw me and came running out of the station. She gave me a tight hug and whispered in my ear "I know why you're here, and I'm so sorry." My prayer was answered by his divine grace.

There was a dark night long ago when some unexpected shepherds witnessed the biggest outpouring of grace in history. A multitude of angels were praising God and giving the best news ever." For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior which is Christ the Lord." The darkness of the night was dispelled by the light of Jesus' birth.

When I was wrapped in God's arms of his glorious grace, I felt his peace in my heart. The coming days were not easy. It's very hard to watch your loved ones die before your eyes, but I kept that calm assurance of His presence with me. In less than 2 weeks, my precious husband closed his eyes on what had been a dark period of struggling with illness and he opened his eyes in the brilliant light of heaven. I have learned to praise God even in the dark because the Light has come into the world. John 8:12 Jesus said, "I am the Light of the world, whoever follows me will never walk In darkness, but will have the light of life." Praise him in the dark.

By Vickie Williams

*December*  
17

### What Do You Want for Christmas?

James 1:17 NIV

“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.”

When I was around 9 or 10 years old, my parents sat me and my sisters down, and asked us what we wanted Santa Claus to bring us for Christmas. Oh boy, I thought! Here’s my chance to get that pony I had been wanting. Judging by the look on my dad’s face, even I could figure out that wasn’t going to happen. My older sister had a bright idea. She suggested that Santa Claus bring me one of those kid’s rocking horses. You know the kind suspended on springs that you bounce up and down on. Well, I did not like that idea and voiced my displeasure. I was way too old to ride a rocking horse, and what if the other kids in the neighborhood found out I had gotten a rocking horse instead of the real thing? Luckily, Santa fulfilled my wishlist with other things.

God is in the business of giving gifts too. He purchased our salvation by sending His Son, Jesus Christ to die on the cross. There is no better gift, and it’s free! To all who will receive, God deposits the Holy Spirit to serve as a guaranteed inheritance of eternal life. What a gift, to have Almighty God living in us! He will continue to shower us with many gifts along the journey. He loves to give, and we should take joy in receiving His trusted treasures. And with God there is no exchange system. So, what do you want for Christmas this year?

By Ned Calvert

*December*  
18

### Water from a Well

Isaiah 12:3 “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.”  
NRSV

Of all the visuals offered by the prophets, this is one of my favorites. We imagine, probably with a healthy amount of romanticism, drawing water from a well. Our tongues are dusty and worn, and the water washes the aching feeling of thirst away. Needs are met. Sorrows are gone. But we may fail to take into account the effort of drawing water from the well. Depending on the pulley, or lack thereof, and the size of the bucket, bringing the water up from underground can be arduous work. Drawing the bucket up can increase our thirst exponentially before it makes it better, but the effort is worth it.

Most of the major prophets write in and around the time of Israel’s exile from the promised land. People have been uprooted. They feel like they have lost their way. The Psalms offer vivid pictures of beds made of tears, and the prophets cast about for meaning in Israel’s darkest hour.

In both cases, the prophets and the Psalms eventually find in this moment a sense of calling. The moment shapes them (Malachi 3:2), and it demands a new effort from God and the people who wrestle with God. Isaiah reminds us that sometimes traveling towards God’s new thing is not a straight and easy path. The water is in the well waiting, but it still needs to be brought up. Isaiah also carefully reminds us that God guides the journey, and it is God who is our strength and salvation (12:2).

So in the hustle and bustle of this Advent season, let yourself relax, and just focus on the steady rhythm of drawing water from the well. Be replenished. Be still. And know God. Remember, the water is there: the path may not be straight but God is our strength.

Meditation: Take 5 minutes and imagine drawing water from a well. Prayerfully consider what the God has done to sustain and replenish you in this season. Consider what bringing this water of salvation to others might look like. Close in thanksgiving by rereading and repeating Isaiah 12:6 5 times, “Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.”

By Jon Hoin

December  
19

### Sanctuary

A couple years back at a church I attended in Atlanta, I noticed a woman I'd never seen before come into the sanctuary and sit in the back pew. She was alone and I thought I'd introduce myself to her after the service. I know how nerve wracking it can be to visit a church alone. I looked back halfway through the service and noticed that the woman was crying. Immediately my mind started spinning and wondering what she could be crying about. At the end of the service I turned around and saw the woman duck out during the last hymn. The following week she returned and sat in the same spot. Again I spotted the tears in her eyes, again she left before the service was over. I didn't see her again for a few weeks, and then on the first Sunday of Advent I recognized her. This time I wouldn't let her get away! I practically ran down the side aisle to catch her and she still made it to the parking lot before I caught up. She looked embarrassed and I was a little embarrassed for chasing her down. I introduced myself and pretended not to notice her reddened, still-teary eyes with a little smeared mascara. "I'm so sorry," she said, "for my appearance. I've just been incredibly stressed at work and home and this is the only quiet space I've found to be able to sit and think and cry." We chatted for a minute and parted ways and the conversation stuck with me. Our church sanctuary was literally the only "sanctuary" that this woman had in her life. I still think about this encounter and try to appreciate how special and holy it is to have a space to bring your full, authentic, stressed-out, crying self, and know that it's alright. So often we think that we have to bring the most polished version of ourselves to church, wearing our Sunday best and big smiles. The truth is that however we come to church, we are coming to a space and time that is set apart. A place where we hopefully feel the full presence of Christ and all the Love that God has for us.

Gracious God we thank you for the spaces and times in life where we experience sanctuary, and feel your presence. Be with us today and every day as we navigate this life you've gifted us. Amen.

By Rev. Sara Relaford

### God is Love

How do you show love to someone that you've never met?

1 John 4:7-11

One Sunday morning I was teaching a lesson to my Joy Sunday School class that was entitled "How do you show love to someone you've never met?" At the end of the lesson, I paused to ask the question, "How do you show love to someone you've never met?" I thought perhaps it might affect a person on the street by saying hello to them who might just need a wave.

Monday morning, I went to my "Needlers Group" here at Union and a lady walked in. She was excited that she was having her first grandchild. The child was to be born on the first of July, but there was one small dilemma. The child was to receive a blanket from his grandmother at his birth. Unfortunately, the grandmother passed away a few weeks before that. Not to be dismayed, the mother asked around to see if there was someone who could finish this blanket.

In the "Needlers Room", several ladies took a look at the blanket. It was the smallest crochet we had ever seen! The needle was about the size of a sewing needle, and to think you would need to crochet this with the material that was given, it was a lot. The four of us looked at it and then it hit me! I had given the lesson just 24 hours ago! There she was, in front of me, I've never met her, didn't know her story, she didn't know mine. It was at that point I felt our lives would be forever connected. God said, "Well Margie you just taught the lesson 24 hours ago, you know how to crochet, you've been doing it all your life, and you love to crochet. You've made hundreds of blankets, so how are you going to show love to someone that you've never met?" At that point I said, "Okay God, I got it." I walked back over to the lady with the blanket, I looked at her with one tear in my eye, and said, "Of course, I'll finish the blanket for you." I picked up the blanket that was meant for this child, who was yet to be born, and started working on it, magnifying glass in one hand and crochet needle in the other. I promised myself that each stitch I made would be with love.

The other needlers decided we needed to indicate where the grandmother started, so at that point we added a heart, and at the point where grandmother stopped, we added a cross. The cross was where the grandmother last touched it before she went to heaven.

When I finished, I met this lady three weeks later, and delivered the blanket. After her grandson was born, I received a picture of this beautiful baby wrapped up in the blanket that was made with so much love. That precious little baby will always feel four generations of love. This is how you show love to someone you've never met. What will you do?

By Margie Mitchell

December  
20

*December*  
*21*

**I(We) really Needed That!**

Luke 2:14

“Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward mankind.”

When I think of Christmases in my life, one of the fondest memories is when we would have the entire family over for Christmas. It was a grand time. We had most of Maria’s family and most of mine. First, we had a remembrance of what the occasion is all about. The oldest man in the family read the Christmas story. Afterwards, we would have the most glorious meal.

All the while, my daughter, Emily was continuously asking when we were going to open presents. We would always say only after all the food was eaten and the dishes were washed and put up. TO which she would reply, “That is not fair!” Our answer to that was, “The fair came in October and would not be back until next year.”

Well, the time for opening presents finally came. Every year, Emily wanted to give everyone their presents. She always surprised us by wanting to open hers last. This increased the anticipation of her opening her presents, But the thing she consistently said when she opened each present, I will always remember. No matter what the present was, she would say, “Thank you, I really needed that!”

I think at Christmas, especially this year, when we have had such struggles with so many issues, we need to remember the gift God gave to us on the first Christmas. He sent his son with the pronouncement by the angels, “Peace on earth and good will to all mankind.” Maybe we need to reply, “Glory to God. Thanks, we really needed that!”

By David Anderson

*December*  
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**Wild and Precious Life**

The poet Mary Oliver has a line in the poem, *The Summer Day* that asks, “What will you do with your one wild and precious life?” This line has always resonated with me and inspired me. As someone who likes to be on the move constantly, and has serious FOMO (fear of missing out,) I often think that I need to be doing more. I tell myself constantly that I could and should be doing more to fill my life and make it the best “one” life possible.

When Mary Oliver passed away a few years ago I mentioned this line to a friend, explaining how it inspired me to do more and be more. My friend, who is much wiser than I am, said, “I think you are missing the point of this line. What did Mary Oliver do with her one wild and precious life? Re-read the rest of that poem.” She was right. How wildly I had misinterpreted this line. Mary Oliver spent her very precious life walking and observing nature. She watched and appreciated God’s natural creation and wrote about it; something that took time and stillness. And here I was trying to say that she inspired me to run more and do more.

This time of year it’s really easy to feel like we need to run around constantly. There is too much to do in preparation for Christmas to simply walk and observe. There is shopping and cooking and driving and parties and obligations galore. It’s hard to let any of these things go. But this year maybe we could be properly inspired by Mary Oliver’s life and poems and slow down to notice God’s beautiful creation during this beautiful season.

“Look up at the sky and consider:

Who created these?

The one who brings out their attendants one by one,  
summoning each of them by name.

Because of God’s great strength  
and mighty power, not one is missing.”

-Isaiah 40:26

By Rev. Sara Relaford

## December 23

### Finding the Gift of Laughter.

Ecclesiastes 3:1 and 4

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every [a]purpose under heaven: 4 a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;”

Last year made things very challenging, but we were able to still go home to see my parents for the Holiday season. It was right after Thanksgiving and we knew that since we lived farther, away we would not be going back for Christmas. My parents and I decided that we would celebrate Christmas early that year.

While making homemade ginger cookies, the sweet aroma warm of sugar, cinnamon and ginger filled the air. Sounds of Christmas music playing in the background, and giggles coming from my daughter playing silly games with her Grandpa in the front room, was so magical.

As soon as the cookies cooled down, we all gathered around the kitchen counter to decorate them. Starting with perfect shapes one by one we decorated the cookies, and they were beautiful. Then, just as in almost every Hallmark Christmas movie, our cookie decorating turned into dancing and singing “Jingle Bell Rock.” Soon, we were seeing how much icing we could get on each other’s faces, and laughter filled the room. It was the best time that I have had with my parents in a long time.

Through the years, I have realized that we don’t have to be serious all of the time, because God didn’t make us that way. He made us in his image and gave us more than one gift. Yes, God gave us the gift of Jesus, but also God said everything has a season, and there is a time for laughter. This Christmas season I hope that you find God’s gift of laughter.

Prayer: Dear God, please help each and everyone find your gift of laughter as we celebrate the birthday of your son Jesus. -Amen

By Amanda Lovett

## December 24

### Fruit Bags

“Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.” 1 Peter 4:10

The small country church I attended as a boy had a tradition of handing out fruit bags for Christmas. We didn’t have Christmas Eve services then, but on the Sunday night before Christmas there was a children’s nativity. At the close of that service everyone present received their bag of fruit.

I recall my excitement when I was old enough to help prepare the bags. We hauled boxes of oranges, tangerines and apples into the church, along with a stack of paper bags. The latter we opened and spread along the pews. Into each bag went two oranges, two tangerines, an apple, a candy bar, a pack of Juicy Fruit gum, a box of raisins, and a flyer that told the story of Christmas and invited the reader to give their heart to Christ. Then we twisted the bags closed and stacked them by the Sanctuary doors.

Since I helped prepare the bags, I got to help hand them out. What I particularly remember all these years later was the delight shown by some of the church’s elderly widows as they received their fruit bag. I have no idea what that moment actually touched in them – a remembrance of some past Christmas, our exuberance in handing out bags, or just the joy of being remembered with a gift.

Perhaps the fruit bags can be a reminder that gift giving can be an opportunity, rather than another Christmas task to check off. For God so loved the world, He gave, and because we know his love, we too can give, as stewards of grace.

Dear God, renew in me the joy of gift-giving and let me share your love. Amen.

By Rev. Stephen Taylor

*December*  
*25*

**Luke 2:6**

“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” With those words the angel announced the birth of Jesus to some shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem. This is not where the announcement was supposed to occur.

In the custom of those days, males stayed clearly apart from the birthing event or the birthing site. When the child arrived, a messenger was sent to tell the father of the birth and whether it was a male for female.

As the gospel writer, Luke, retold the story of Jesus’ birth, he obviously was familiar with this custom. Most likely a messenger was indeed sent to tell Joseph of the birth. But Luke didn’t include that. He put the emphasis on the angel (which means “messenger”) announcing the birth to, of all people, lowly shepherds.

In other words, Luke wants us to know that this child, this Jesus, this SAVIOR is for everyone. No matter what name, family, group, label, category, or other box you might be in because of some aspect of your identity, Jesus was born for you.

And he came to reveal the pure and complete love of God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) for us. God didn’t “send” Jesus. 2 Corinthians 5:19 says, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.”

Christmas is always personal and relational. For through this birth our triune God proclaims to each of us, “I love you, and I will let nothing stand as a barrier between us.” I think that’s the best Christmas gift of all!

Prayer: Thank you God, for the gift of yourself in Jesus Christ. Help me to grow into the full awareness and joy of your gift. Amen.

By Rev. Stephen Taylor

*Merry*  
*Christmas*  
  
*and*  
  
*Happy*  
  
*New Year*

from all of us at  
Union United Methodist Church

We hope that your Holiday Season is filled with love.



Union United Methodist Church  
7582 Woodrow Street  
P.O. Box 705  
Irmo, SC 29063-0705

**December 3-5, 6:30 - 9 p.m.**

*The Living Christmas Story*

**Sunday, December 19, at 10:30 a.m.**

*The Living Nativity*

**Sunday, December 19, at 4:00 p.m.**

*Tapestry of Light*

A Celtic Christmas Celebration

**December 24**

*Candlelight Communion Service*

**4:00 p.m. Contemporary Service**

**6:00 p.m. Traditional Service**

**7:45 p.m. Traditional Service**

**Ministers:**

Rev. Stephen P. Taylor, Senior Pastor  
Rev. Sara Relaford, Associate Pastor

**Sunday worship times:**

9 a.m. Traditional worship

11 a.m. Contemporary worship

Telephone: 803-781-3013

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