



Advent Reflections 2016



Eastern PA District of the Christian & Missionary Alliance

Table of Contents

Advent 2016

November 27	4
November 28	5
November 29	6
November 30	8
December 1	9
December 2	10
December 3	12
December 4	14
December 5	15
December 6	16
December 7	18
December 8	19
December 9	20
December 10	21
December 11	23
December 12	24
December 13	25
December 14	27
December 15	28

December 16	29
December 17	30
December 18	31
December 19	32
December 20	33
December 21	35
December 22	36
December 23	37
December 24	39
December 25	40

November 27



Savior

As the Advent season is upon us, we open various doors of our calendars containing Lego sets, chocolate, decorations. Looking closer, we open the doors to our hearts as He calls from His mansion with many rooms to house us all.

Jesus was first rejected in Bethlehem as his parents were turned away, long before he was rejected on the cross. *Heavenly, all-knowing Father, let salvation furnished by Jesus' death be all the gift we need this Christmas season.*

Jared Conti
The Common Place

In 2015, The Common Place focused on the fourfold gospel and the question, "What's So Great About Jesus" during Advent 2015. Sarah Grimes did the woodcuts (pictured above) for each week.

November 28

Service with a Smile!

“Consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise.”

1 Corinthians 1:26, 27

One of the amazing features of the Christmas story is how God used everyday folks as the big players. He used an ordinary girl and her boyfriend Joe, and socially unimportant people such as shepherds and a couple of old people at the temple. None of these people had a reputation of being special at the opening of the story.

This is encouraging because God is still writing His story. He continues looking for people of all ages who will set aside their own agenda and like Mary say, “May it be done to me according to your word,” even though she could be stoned for becoming pregnant out of wedlock. “Joseph awoke and did as the angel commanded,” even though he would lose his upright reputation. The shepherds said, “Let us go quickly,” even though the story they had to share sounded pretty far-fetched.

As God writes this year’s Christmas story, He may include ordinary people like us who pray, “Yes, Lord, I accept this situation. Use me here, even if I sound a little crazy or lose something precious in the process. I will quickly obey; I am at Your service!” The Bible and history are filled with examples of God mightily using people willing to go with His plan. This Christmas He might want to do some miracles in Eastern Pennsylvania!

**Ingrid Winckler
Widow of Chaplain John Winckler**

November 29

Advent Meditation

One of the hazards of my line of work is that the Advent season tends to rush by in a flurry of activity until Christmas is upon us. I suppose that's not something that's unique to pastors. If I remember right, it happened to me just as easily before I entered ministry as well. The Thanksgiving rush gives way to a flurry of necessary preparations: decorating, cooking, buying, wrapping...not to mention worshipping, performing, observing, and, of course, partying. However, as I look ahead at the next several weeks, I invite you to think. Actually process. Meditate, if you will.

To contemplate the reality that two thousand years ago, at a point in time in actual history, God broke into our reality, and in doing so, He changed everything.

Thousands of years of prophets and promises. Figures that foreshadowed His coming. The unfolding of a redemption narrative that has captured the imagination of both the pagan and the devout for the last two millennia.

At a point in time, the better Isaac was born. The ultimate Son of the Promise, who would one day become the sacrifice, but this time, none would stay the Father's hand.

To an actual mom and an adoptive dad, the better Moses was born. He would become the great Deliverer who would lead His people out of captivity.

The hope of the entire family of God, the better Passover lamb was born. His blood would be spread, and the wrath of God would be assuaged.

In a cave or stable in a back alley, at a fixed point in geography, the better Joshua was born. He would lead all who would follow, from every tribe, tongue, and nation, into the Promised Land.

In utter poverty, the better King David was born. Several years later, royal gifts would be bestowed upon Him, and one day He would rule His people with justice, conquering every foe.

But at the time, no one knew. The crying, illegitimate baby would never have been confused for the promise of Isaac, the hope of Moses, or the Passover lamb. It would never have been imagined that this dirty and impoverished child would be a great leader, much yet a king. In fact, the period

of waiting had been so long, spreading over so many generations, it's likely the people had given up any real hope. They had stopped watching and waiting, and had entered into simply living.

That's our danger today, isn't it? Seasons have passed, year after year, and nothing seems to have really changed. And so, we rush from Thanksgiving to Christmas, arriving at Christmas Eve flustered, exhausted, and already spent. We no longer wait—we simply live. Advent has disappeared into the "Holiday Season," and the watching...the waiting...the anticipation... they have all disappeared along with it.

This is intended to be a season of watching. Of waiting. Watching for Jesus to be present in our midst, and waiting for opportunities to make Him present in our world. But all of that requires hope. A belief, by faith, that the Kingdom will someday come fully, and that it will continually come more fully in us. A hope that the power of God in our midst can unify, empower, transform, and propel us to look more like Jesus ourselves, becoming the message of the gospel to those around us. To love as He loved, to give as He gave, and to live contented, joyful lives in a world that is rushing after the next great thing.

Brian Kannel
Lead Pastor, York Alliance Church

November 30

Christmas Worship

How can I worship this Christmas?
With Mary, in awe, can I be
A handmaid who yields in surrender
And ponders God's working in me?

How can I worship this Christmas,
As Joseph so willingly did?
Heeding God's word and obeying
Doing things just as He said.

How can I worship this Christmas?
Making room in my home for Him—
No matter how humble and busy,
Letting Christ dwell within.

How can I worship this Christmas,
In a way that will mean the most?
For I long to blend my praises
With those of the heavenly host.

How can I worship this Christmas?
Like those lowly shepherds of old
Spreading abroad the story
The sweetest that ever was told.

How can I worship this Christmas?
What meaningful gifts can I bring?
For I long to pay my tribute
To the wonderful, heavenly King.

I can worship this year at the manger—
I can bow my knees in awe
That God sent Christ as a baby,
With manger and angels and star.

It's easy to kneel at the manger—
To rejoice at the tiny King,
Without counting the cost of commitment
Without giving Him everything.

But if truly I want to worship
That Savior of Bethlehem,
I must follow Him on to Calv'ry,
The place where He died for our sin.

That wonderful Baby of Christmas
Asks only one gift from me:
That I give myself in surrender
And let Him my Master be.

How can I worship this Christmas?
I must count my life but loss.
For to worship the Babe in the manger,
I must yield to the Christ of the cross.

Jean Muckel
Retired

December 1

Recapturing the Meaning of Christmas

*'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel'—
which means 'God with us.'
Matthew 1:23*

"Everywhere, everywhere, Christmas tonight!"—Phillips Brooks

That there were in the world multiplied millions who had never heard of Christmas did not matter to our poet for the purpose of his poem. He was expressing an emotional fact, not a statistical one.

Throughout the Western world we tend to follow the poet and approach Christmas emotionally instead of factually. It is the romance of Christmas that gives it its extraordinary appeal to that relatively small number of persons of the earth's population who regularly celebrate it.

So completely are we carried away by the excitement of this midwinter festival that we are apt to forget that its romantic appeal is the least significant thing about it. The theology of Christmas too easily gets lost under the gay wrappings, yet apart from its theological meaning it really has none at all. A half dozen doctrinally sound carols serve to keep alive the great deep truth of the Incarnation, but aside from these, popular Christmas music is void of any real lasting truth. The English mouse that was not even stirring, the German Tannenbaum so fair and lovely and the American red-nosed reindeer that has nothing to recommend it have pretty well taken over in Christmas poetry and song. These along with merry old St. Nicholas have about displaced Christian theology.

Thought: It's not "Santa Clausmas" or "Scroogemas" or "giftmas" or "treemas." It is Christmas. How critical it is that we put Christ back in Christmas.

A.W. Tozer

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December 2

O Little Town of Bethlehem

This Advent season took me frequently to Bethlehem. *The* Bethlehem—the city in the Palestinian West Bank. This is where my family and I serve as International Workers. At Advent and Christmas time people often want to hear about Bethlehem, the Bethlehem of Christmas pageants, hymnody, and drippy greeting card poetry. How three ships came sailing in to landlocked Bethlehem, and why “on Christmas day in the morning” is still a mystery to me. The peaceful Bethlehem with quaint stables, new mothers who look more serene than exhausted, surprisingly tidy shepherds, and beasts of burden without any manure, is not the Bethlehem I know.

Our Bethlehem is loud and a bit dirty. It is inhabited by Muslims and Christians who do their best to live side by side, and surrounded by concrete fences that do not make good neighbors. These walls hem the majority of the West Bank's Christians into a scant four square miles of space. Some call these separation or occupation walls, others security barriers. The nomenclature, of course, ranges according to one's political and/or theological views. The realities of the social and economic problems, the shortages of water, a politicized and militarized existence, continuing expropriation of land, and limitations of many basic freedoms remain the same no matter who bears the brunt of the blame.

It is a sad irony that the economy of Bethlehem is so heavily dependent on tourism, an industry which is dependent entirely on relative peace. This is ironic because peace is among the scarcest natural resources in the lands of the Bible.

I know that for many tourists, Bethlehem and the Nativity Church can be one of the highlights of their trip. But honestly, for many who live in Bethlehem, Bethlehem can be a bit of a drag.

The thing is, I think *this* Bethlehem—burdened, restless, waiting for something, hoping for something, *real* Bethlehem—is probably much more like the Bethlehem into which Jesus entered than the Bethlehem of our Christian imaginations. It too was a town in an occupied territory, a town which likely supposed its past brighter than its future, a town that witnessed death and tragedy, a town that, but for its famous royal son, was not particularly noteworthy. It was not a destination, just a stopping point along the way. When I look at modern Bethlehem I think it remains, in significant ways, quite like its smaller, ancient self.

Yet this is the village to which God came. And I am thankful that the people living in darkness are still receiving a chance to see a great light, and that we, His Church, are able to play a small part in

that Christmas pageant. I am reminded, especially in this Advent season, that the gospel is for the poor, and the poor in Spirit, because the Kingdom is for the poor, and the poor in Spirit. Whether they, or we, will embrace it or not, this gospel of peace is good news for Palestinians, Israelis, and the entire world. God came to Bethlehem, and still comes to the Bethlehems of the world, because, as the Virgin sang,

"He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty." (Luke 1:51-53 ESV)

This Advent season may we all empty ourselves of those things which separate us from God and which separate us from the least of these, in order that we might be filled by Him and used by Him to fill the hearts and hands of those who need Him most.

Scot A. Dressler
International Worker, Israel and Palestinian Territories

December 3

Prayers at Christmas

As I meditated again on the familiar Christmas story this year, I found myself drawn to two of the “other” people in the account furnished to us in the Gospel of Luke. Their names are Simeon and Anna, and they appear when the holy family arrives at the temple after the time of Mary’s purification. Mary and Joseph are there to present their firstborn son, with a dove as a sacrifice, to the Lord.

These two people do not seem to be related to Mary and Joseph or to one another. They appear separately and sequentially in Luke’s record and may not have even known the other existed. Both, however, recognize the child for who He is— the long awaited Messiah. And both, moved by the Holy Spirit, are led to utter words of prophecy and praise.

What intrigues me about these two mysterious individuals, who appear so fleetingly and then disappear, is that they underscore the hidden role that praying people always play in the great drama of salvation. The second of the seven core values of The Alliance states: “Prayer is the primary work of the people of God.”

Luke, more than any of the other gospel writers, notices people like this, and the theme of prayer and people who pray is consistently highlighted in both of his New Testament books. As you follow his narratives, he links the activity of prayer to nearly every significant event in the life of Jesus and the Early Church.

Simeon was clearly a man of prayer. He lived in the presence of the Holy Spirit (an interesting precursor of the “normal” Christian life after the day of Pentecost), and he was “waiting for the consolation of Israel,” the coming of the Messiah. Moved by the Spirit, he arrived at the temple at exactly the right moment to encounter the newborn Savior.

Anna, the prophetess, “never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying . . .” (Luke 2:37). She too arrives, through the leading of the Spirit, at just the right time to see the baby.

I do not pretend to understand the deep things of God. The mystery of how divine sovereignty and human responsibility intersect and interact without nullifying each other eludes me completely. I simply know (because the Bible says so) that both are true. God moves and no man

can stay His hand. He ordains the times and the seasons, and He and He alone determined before the foundation of the world the “fullness of time” when Christ would come.

On the other hand, it is equally true that God ordains the human “means” by which His will is worked out in the affairs of men. It is also clear from Scripture that He uses the prayers of men and women of faith to “trigger” His divinely planned interventions in our world. Simeon and Anna remind us that there was a cadre of faithful saints fervently praying for the redemption of Israel. Their prayers were one of the things that God used to bring His Kingdom to the earth, and He rewarded their faithfulness by allowing them to see His Savior.

Christmas is nothing at all if it is not a reminder to us that ultimately we can do nothing to bring God’s Kingdom to the earth. That is the whole point of the Incarnation. Jesus had to come because we could not—with all of the best efforts of righteous men and women—do anything at all to affect our own salvation. And when we finally realize that we can do nothing for ourselves, the only thing left for us is to pray that God will do what we cannot!

No one in Jerusalem would have thought that Simeon and Anna were important people. But they were praying people. And from heaven’s perspective, that made them very important indeed—important enough to get mentioned in the Bible! Important enough to meet the Messiah!

I am very sure this Christmas that some of the most influential Christians on earth are almost totally unknown to the rest of us. It is because their work is the “hidden work” of prayer. No one sees what they are doing. In fact, from our vantage point, they do not seem to be doing anything at all! If anyone ever notices them, it is just for one fleeting moment; then, like Simeon and Anna, they are gone and forgotten—but not to God.

John Soper
Lead Pastor, Ridgeway Church (White Plains, NY)

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December 4



Sanctifier

The Christmas season is here. The year winds down to its final waning days and tensions escalate as schedules tighten, priorities are compromised, and the reason for the season is blurred amid last-minute gift giving and time-honored traditions. We feel as if we are swimming upstream, heads barely above water. This life threatens to drown us, and it would, if not for the rescue of Your holy hands. Sanctify us in the healing waters of Your grace. Let the boat rock us to sleep as You rested upon the tumultuous seas, trusting in Your Father. Help us to weather this storm beside You as Your passengers.

Jared Conti
The Common Place

The Common Place focused on the fourfold gospel and the question, "What's So Great About Jesus" during Advent 2015. Sarah Grimes did the woodcuts (pictured above) for each week.

December 5

Conduits of His Love

"If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites...do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. Rather, be openhearted...Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart..."

Deuteronomy 15:7, 8, 10

While not being a standard Christmas text, these verses provide a good reminder for us during this season of the year that for many of us is characterized by lavish abundance. There are those living around us who are struggling to put food on the table and keep a roof over their heads, let alone put gifts under the tree. While we are spending large sums of money on Christmas gifts, it would behoove us to find good ways to help such people.

Perhaps this can happen through our church or a local faith-based non-profit organization that does an especially good job helping such folks. Or perhaps there's a way we can get directly involved with a family in need. However we determine to accomplish this, let's open our hearts and hands in Jesus' name and allow ourselves to be conduits of His love in a way that puts some merry in someone else's Christmas.

Lord Jesus, give us Your eyes to see people in need and Your heart to extend love and compassion toward them. May this Christmas season not be all about me and my family, but may it include being intentional about showing Your love to others in tangible ways. Let your light shine through us.

Terry Smith
District Superintendent, Eastern PA District

December 6

Getting Close

The incarnation, it seems to me, is the central mystery of the Christian faith. Certainly the atonement and the resurrection are incredibly profound in their implications, but the idea that the God of the Universe, eternally existing in Spirit, chooses to lower Himself to the level of His creation, limiting Himself to the confines of the flesh, subjecting Himself to the race that He had spoken into being...words fail as I think about how unbelievable it all is. God with skin on—Jesus of Nazareth, the carpenter from down the street.

He came close to us. Became one of us. Got dirty right alongside of us. Breathed our air, smelled our scents, battled our appetites. He dealt with difficult people just like you and I do—in fact, He was ultimately killed by them. He grew and developed. The eternal, all-knowing God of the Universe *learned*. I'm not sure that I understand how all of that works, and I don't have to get too far in my series of questions before my theology is shot full of holes and my brain is bordering on combustion. God...as a man.

In order to reach us, He got close to us. He became one of us.

He didn't shout from afar. He didn't send divine shoe boxes from heaven. He didn't proclaim the good news on the radio. He didn't write a blog. All of those things may have their place, but that's not the method the Almighty God of the Universe chose. Instead, He came close. He got right next to us, lived alongside of us, and ultimately, He was trusted enough that He only needed whisper the Truth and it was understood and believed.

The question I'm wrestling with is: To whom am I that close? Is my gospel proclaimed from afar, or am I right there in the middle of everything, living in the midst of those who desperately need to know? Often, I find myself stating with my words and intellect that I am called to reach a certain person, or certain population of people, or certain kind of person. However, an honest life evaluation would say that those I'm closest to are exactly like me. I long to reach people with the gospel, but I'm barely near enough to shout, let alone understand their pain and their joy in order to help them understand and know the Truth.

The apostle Paul said it this way: *"For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law."*

To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings." (1 Corinthians 9:19-23)

My testimony, sadly, sounds different: "Since I'm free, I'm kind of busy with my own stuff right now, that I might enjoy my freedom more. To the culturally religious I don't become anything—rather, I tend to mock them. To the hyper-religious, I don't become anything—rather, I tend to mock them, too. To the pagan, I don't become anything—yep, you guessed it—I tend to mock them too. I think maybe I have a problem with cynicism. And sometimes, if I'm honest, I'm a little jealous. To the weak, downtrodden, suffering, poor, and sick, I basically just live in my health and comfort and hope someone does something about their lot in life. All of this I do for my own sake, because I'm pretty important, at least to me."

Jesus got close to us. He could understand where we're coming from because he was coming from there as well. He got right down next to us...and loved us.

Seems that we should probably follow His example.

Brian Kannel
Lead Pastor, York Alliance Church

December 7

A Meaningful Christmas Character

Today in this world of turmoil it has lost the true meaning of Christmas. The priorities have focused more on material things rather than spiritual matters. We must remember that Christmas is the starting point on the way to the cross, and both together become the most important events of Christianity, through whom our Heavenly Father began the ransom and reconciliation plan for every human being. Even the church has been distracted in the variety of its events and activities of this season, losing a precious opportunity to be the light that enlightens the hearts and minds that have fallen into the pressure and stress of this celebration.

In Luke chapter 1, we read about an interesting character, Mary, who is noteworthy for her humbleness and obedience. Beyond her young age, she deeply loved God and knew of his promises announcing the coming of the Messiah. What she never imagined was that she would conceive the Son of God, the promised Messiah. After she heard the announcement of the angel Gabriel, she was speechless. This had been the most anticipated announcement for all humanity, and is now a living reality. Mary's final words after Gabriel's announcement are the model of obedience, which we need to follow to be trust-worthy ambassadors of His Kingdom in this season: "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."

Are we ready in this Christmas season to let the Holy Spirit, who indwells in us, who has given us a new beginning and identity, works in and through us as vessels of His Kingdom, give Him honor and glory, by the bold proclamation of Jesus' Gospel?

Heavenly Father, we pray in this Christmas season, you would give us a pure and faithful heart like Mary had. A heart focused in the true meaning of your lovely purpose to send your Son Jesus Christ to be the Savior and Redeemer of this world. Empower us to remain free of the world's pollution so that our souls will not be tainted and we can be vessels for you to dwell in and flow through. We want to serve you in the way we live our lives, in holiness and surrendered to you. Lord, we need a unique miracle in us; birth something great through us. Let it be to us according to your Word! In the name of Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

Xavier Godoy
Spanish-Speaking Point Person, Eastern PA District

December 8

Determining the Personal Meaning of Christmas

It is written: 'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.'

Romans 14:11

While faith contains an element of reason, it is essentially moral rather than intellectual. In the New Testament unbelief is a sin, and this could not be so if belief were no more than a verdict based upon evidence. There is nothing unreasonable about the Christian message, but its appeal is not primarily to reason. At a specific time in a certain place God became flesh, but the transcendence of Christ over the human conscience is not historic; it is intimate, direct, and personal.

Christ's coming to Bethlehem's manger was in harmony with the primary fact of His secret presence in the world in preincarnate times as the Light that lighteth every man. The sum of the New Testament teaching about this is that Christ's claims are self-validating and will be rejected only by those who love evil. Whenever Christ is preached in the power of the Spirit, a judgment seat is erected and each hearer stands to be judged by his response to the message. His moral responsibility is not to a lesson in religious history but to the divine Person who now confronts him.

Thought: As we accept or reject the Christ who came, we personally determine the meaning of Christmas. We may see Him as the baby in the manger or the great I AM before whom every knee shall bow. He is our Lord and Savior or just a Christmas symbol.

A.W. Tozer

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December 9

Praise Our Immanuel

If you have loved ones who won't be home for Christmas, you know it's not the same unless you see them in person. You can't hug them; you can't laugh together and eat together. We long to be together *in person* with our loved ones. God feels the same way about us too.

The name Immanuel, originally given as a prophecy in Isaiah 7, is applied to Christ in the story of his birth in Matthew 1:23. Jesus' birth was the fullest expression that God would come to be present with us and would become one of us. In Hebrew "Imm" = *with*, "anu" = *us*, and "el" = *God*. So literally, Jesus is the "With Us God." God did not stay distant, but instead, driven by His longing to be *in person*, He came to live, laugh, and eat with us.

Two thousand years ago was His first coming and He's still the "With Us God" now. If you're a believer in Christ, then He came to you as Immanuel at some point in your life and introduced Himself to you. He showed you His wonderful grace and brought you salvation, and He took up residence in you through the Holy Spirit. It's really the greatest thing we have because His presence is more than enough for every trial, struggle, need, or worry you and I will ever have. And one day, the "With Us God" will come again to "live with us" (Rev. 21:3) in our home in heaven. Praise our Immanuel!

Steve Wiggins
Lead Pastor, Immanuel Church

December 10

Seeing Christmas Anew

For years I have delighted in the preparations of Christmas—decorating the perfect tree, baking delicious cookies, selecting and wrapping thoughtful gifts, listening to Christmas songs on the radio, and contemplating the Advent season.

Of course, like so many of us, I've also felt the stress that comes with my own lofty expectations for a perfect, meaningful Christmas and a to-do list that outlasts the hours in a day. I've caught myself looking forward to Christmas just being over so there aren't pine needles, receipts, gift bags, and cards all throughout the house.

But this year something is different. The preparations are basically the same, but my outlook is different, thanks to a sweet little girl who is newly experiencing the joy of Christmas.

This technically isn't my 16-month-old daughter Adele's first Christmas per se, but she's certainly a much more active (and enthusiastic!) participant this year than she was as a sleepy 4-month-old last holiday season.

Adele is in love with the lights—the white ones twisted along our porch railing and in our shrubs outside and the multicolored ones wrapped around our family Christmas tree.

She points happily at the little Christmas village atop our mantel, all nestled on a bed of fluffy "snow." She delights in the ornaments on the tree, a variety of colorful balls representing mine and my husband's childhoods. She claps gleefully when she hears "Jingle Bells." And, she stops every day to ponder the Nativity scene, pointing carefully at the animals and imitating their sounds.

Adele is simply awed by the beauty of the Christmas season. She doesn't know to ask for presents, and she isn't anticipating a visit from Santa Claus. She just knows that her house is suddenly a sparkling, pretty place with festive music piping out of every speaker.

So why shouldn't I focus on the same things that delight Adele this Christmas? Why shouldn't I gaze in wonder at the Nativity scene and imagine and marvel how Jesus spent his first hours on earth in the company of farm animals? Why shouldn't I just rest in the peaceful glow of the Christmas tree? Am I really too old to thrill a bit when the outdoor lights come on because their beauty is unexpected?

Repeatedly I have stopped to be thankful for the gift of Adele this Christmas season. She probably has no idea that she is inspiring her mommy to see Christmas in a new, grateful light. Even as she gets older and she gets more caught up in the frenzy of the season, I hope I will always remember how it felt to see Christmas through her excited, innocent eyes.

Her young, fresh perspective is just what I need this Christmas – and for all my Christmases to come.

Beth Lorow
Administrative Assistant, Eastern PA District Office

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December 11



Healer

You've saved us from the frozen landscapes of a life cut off from Your light. We cannot help but live in the darkness of this world, but Your Holy Spirit breathes fire into our bones and fills the cracks and holes and the broken places we never knew we had. Help us to turn to You as the holiest of carpenters fixing us with the wood and nails of Your death on the cross.

Jared Conti
The Common Place

The Common Place focused on the fourfold gospel and the question, "What's So Great About Jesus" during Advent 2015. Sarah Grimes did the woodcuts (pictured above) for each week.

December 12

Joy in the Midst of Chaos

Did you ever have one of those days where nothing seemed...normal? You get an unexpected phone call that brings bad news. Or maybe, your once reliable car is, well, not. The days I am referring to are the kind that take you out of your daily routine and replace it with something unexpected.

Usually, these types of days do not cause much joy; however, it did once on a clear night long ago. We read about it in Matthew chapter 2.

A group of stargazers once noticed a star in the sky that was different from the rest. It seemed to be beckoning them, maybe even leading them. As stargazers, they knew stars did not act this way. Did they get scared? No. Did they give up? No. Did they follow it? Yes! And they even found joy in the midst of the chaos (v. 10). They followed the star until it brought them to a house in Bethlehem where they found the True Light, the one who would lead them through the worst of circumstances.

There will be plenty more days when the world will not make sense, but the question you must ask yourself is, "Will I still follow The Light?" I encourage you to seek joy even in the midst of the chaos. Jesus gave it to a group of magi, and he will give it to you today too.

Matthew York
Lead Pastor, Faith Alliance Church

December 13

Waiting for Love

Advent is a time of waiting. The "Christmas season" is full of activity: lists to be completed, events to be attended, chores to be accomplished. Christmas is hustle and bustle, perpetual motion slowed only by the arrival of the day itself, and even then only for a moment. It's loud and busy and outward. Advent, however, is different. It's patient. It's expectant. It's inward.

Advent and Christmas don't need to be seen as an "either/or" proposition. Advent can happen right in the middle of the craziness of Christmas, because as outward as Christmas is, Advent is really an inward attitude of the heart. It's an expectant waiting and hope that God will come among His people. It's having eyes that are wide open and ready to see Him. Advent is not helped by our full to-do lists, but neither is it negated by them. We can't check "expectant waiting" off our chore list; but it requires intentionality all the same. Advent is not an event to be observed and completed, although calendars will be opened and church services attended whether our hearts are engaged or not. In fact, the heart of Advent is one that doesn't expire at the end of a season, but rather, it's an attitude that remains year-round, simply to be refocused during this season of waiting each year.

In Luke's gospel, a cast of characters is listed: Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph, Simeon, Anna...all of them were waiting. They are representative of a remnant of Israel that was still waiting in faith that someday God would move. It's important to note that not all of the nation waited. Many had given up hope—at least real hope—and were simply going through the motions of worship in the temple. But a few, represented by these characters in the opening chapters of Luke's gospel, faithfully waited on God to move among His people. These hearts became the stage on which the drama of God's redemptive plan would unfold. In the "fullness of time," Paul says. The drama began first in the hearts and then in the lives of those who waited.

Often lost at the end of one of Paul's most beloved chapters, 1 Corinthians 13, is this statement: "There are three things that will endure—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love." (1 Cor. 13:13, NLT) Faith: the confident assurance that what we hope for is going to happen, even though we can't yet see it. (Hebrews 11:1) Hope: a yearning, expectation, and desire for something to happen. Both of these are the raw materials of Advent. They are virtually bursting out of the early chapters of Luke's gospel, and they are what you and I are called to in the attitude of Advent. Waiting for the promise to be fulfilled.

How did they wait? Henri Nouwen makes the observation that Mary went to Elizabeth and they waited *together*. Advent is not an attitude that we develop only in solitude, but one that we share with others and encourage through community. We together remember the promises of God, the reality that's far greater than what we see with our eyes. We encourage one another to have faith. To remain in hope. We remind one another that God is coming and that we are to wait on Him with eager expectation.

And the greatest of these is love.

Why? Because we wait with expectation for a day when faith will no longer be necessary—all that we long for will be seen with our eyes and experienced with all of our senses. We wait for the moment when there's nothing left to hope for because all of our hopes are fulfilled in His Kingdom reign. What, then, will be left? Simply love. Love that was embodied in the baby in Bethlehem. The eternal God, come among His people. Justice and righteousness kissing at the manger. The promise of Jesus is that He will come again, and all that is wrong will completely be made right. The Kingdom that is now in part will be in full. Every tear will be wiped away. There will be no need for sun or moon, for He will be our Light.

All that will remain is love. And so, we wait.

Brian Kannel
Lead Pastor, York Alliance Church

December 14

Stars at Christmas

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.

Matthew 2:9

Matthew 2:9 says that these “wise seekers” were led by the “star” to Jesus, the Christ child. As you meditate on this passage, think of the number of people who are unsaved all around you. Maybe it’s the neighbor or the salesman, or maybe even one of your own family members. They are seekers. Likewise, think of the “star” as the object God used to take these seekers to the Christ Child.

Think back on your life of who or what God used to point you to Him. For me, it was my mother and father who lived their lives as a testimony of grace. They were, in my life, a “star” that pointed me to Jesus. Another “star” for me was an evangelist who came to my church and laid out the importance of making that commitment to follow Christ.

Today, think of the “stars” in your life who pointed you to the Lord. Was it a Sunday School teacher, a youth pastor, or a difficult time in our life? Why not thank those God for those “stars” in your life?

But don’t stop there!

Ask God for “stars” to come into the life of your unsaved child who is away at college or even your neighbor. And, if you are brave enough, ask God to make you into one of His “stars” who point others to Jesus.

Rubens Ruba
Lead Pastor, Lewisburg Alliance Church

December 15

Concentrating on Christ at Christmas

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.'

Luke 2:13-14

Christmas as it is celebrated today is badly in need of a radical reformation. What was at first a spontaneous expression of an innocent pleasure has been carried to inordinate excess. In one section of Chicago, for instance, the excited citizenry vie with each other each year for the biggest, gaudiest, and most vulgar Christmas tree, on the porch, on the lawn, along the street; and one gigantic, flashily dressed, and cold but determinedly smiling Santa Claus drives a fully lighted herd of reindeer across the yard and over the house!

How far have we come in the corruption of our tastes from the reverence of the simple shepherds, the chant of the angels, and the beauty of the heavenly host! The Star of Bethlehem could not lead a wise man to Christ today; it could not be distinguished amid the millions of artificial lights hung aloft on Main Street by the Merchants Association. No angels could sing loudly enough to make themselves heard above the raucous, earsplitting rendition of "Silent Night" meant to draw customers to the neighborhood stores.

In our mad materialism we have turned beauty into ashes, prostituted every normal emotion and made merchandise of the holiest gift the world ever knew. Christ came to bring peace and we celebrate His coming by making peace impossible for six weeks of each year. Not peace but tension, fatigue, and irritation rule the Christmas season. He came to free us of debt and many respond by going deep into debt each year to buy enervating luxuries for people who do not appreciate them. He came to help the poor and we heap gifts upon those who do not need them. The simple token given out of love has been displaced by expensive presents given because we have been caught in a squeeze and don't know how to back out of it. Not the beauty of the Lord our God is found in such a situation, but the ugliness and deformity of human sin.

Thought: Making Christ the center of Christmas relieves the tension of shopping and delivers us from the cesspool of commercialism into which we can be submerged. Let's take time to join the angel hosts in praising God and singing, "Glory to God in the highest."

A.W. Tozer

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December 16

Scarlet Cord

You must leave this scarlet rope hanging from the window...

Joshua 2:18

It is said that 73.6% of all statistics are made up...some even say that number is as high as 90%. Apparently people believe anything that has a percentage sign attached to it. Uruguay has some pretty high percentages, and I don't think that they are made up. Divorce, depression, abortion, and atheism are the highest ranking statistics. We know five couples that in the last year have gotten divorced, several friends are dealing with depression, and last month the doorman's (from our apartment building) wife committed suicide.

Hmmm, this doesn't sound like a very cheery Christmas sentiment! Oh, but it is...because God has provided a scarlet lifeline of hope for us. As we have been doing our daily Advent reading from *The Greatest Gift*, we have come across some amazing thoughts that we would like to share with you. God showed up for Rahab in a place that she didn't expect to find Him. She lived in a godless place with a sordid past, but she became the great-grandmother of Jesus, many times removed. She was not defined by her past, poor personal choices, or pain. She did not succumb to the diagnosis of despair. She threw the scarlet cord out the window as the spies instructed her to do. The word in Hebrew for cord is *tikvah*, the same word for "hope" in Hebrew! Is that why people say that they are at the end of their rope? In reality they are at the end of their hope, with nothing left to hold on to.

We are thankful that we have the privilege of sharing hope with our neighbors and friends. It is 100% sure that God can give them hope, even if they are dangling by that last frayed strand. At this Christmas season, "*May the **God of hope** fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with **hope** by the power of the Holy Spirit.*" (Romans 15:13).

Bruce Beers
International Worker, Uruguay

December 17

What Kind of Season Is It?

The blessed Advent season is upon us again and for many in our world it is simply another holiday. A time so packed full of action (parties, shopping, noisy crowds, programs, travel, tree-trimming, gift-wrapping, baking, cooking, eating) that some folks say they actually dread the season and will be glad when it is over. They would describe the holiday as holiDAZE.

Ah, the good news of Advent lifts one far above and beyond just a holiday season and delivers from the dreadful foggy daze. Chapter one of Matthew records the account of Joseph's dream in which the angel told him about the "meaning of the season" (vv. 18-25). The son Mary would birth was to be called "JESUS" and He would save his people from their sins (v. 21). So as we kneel at the manger, we look up and beyond to the cross, to the empty tomb and remember Christ made the perfect sacrifice for our sin, for He came on a saving mission. Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Then Matthew reaches back into the Old Testament and quotes Isaiah's words that the son's name was to be called Emmanuel (which means, God with us). In the Old Testament God's promise to be with His people was the answer to their fears. His glory dwelt in Israel's midst in the tabernacle. And let us never forget that Jesus is the ultimate and complete fulfillment of the "Emmanuel" promise with which He commissioned His apostles and encourages His church, "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). The writer to the Hebrews in chapter thirteen gives us a precious promise from the Lord who says, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (v. 5b). By the way, this promise says the same thing even when we read it backwards.

As we keep our eyes on Jesus who came to save us, and rejoice in His indwelling presence, we will find the season of Advent to be joy-filled, God-honoring, Christ-exalting HOLY DAYS!

Walt Frankenberry
Retired

December 18



Coming King

He meets us at the cell door, and releasing us from our self-imposed prisons, opens our eyes to the sun in its warmth and brightness of His glory. The chains of our sin drop to the floor with an audible "clunk" and much less noise than in our former life. He shoulders the burdens that we have carried far too long. He is our coming King and has returned to set us free. We follow him now.

Jared Conti
The Common Place

The Common Place focused on the fourfold gospel and the question, "What's So Great About Jesus" during Advent in 2015. Sarah Grimes did the woodcuts (pictured above) for each week.

December 19

Unwrapping the Gift

The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Mark 1:1

Mark's story of Christmas! Mark, what are you trying to do here?

The mother in the family came downstairs to the tree early Christmas morning, and found a beautifully wrapped present with her name on it. She picked it up gently, so delighted as she turned it over, admiring the sender's beautiful job in preparing it for her.

The son in the family came running downstairs to the tree early Christmas morning. Finding a beautifully wrapped present with his name on it, he tore at it excitedly, sending the paper and ribbon flying as he pulled out the gift.

"Mark, what are you doing here?" Didn't you hear the Christmas story? Mark is doing just what the little boy did, he is telling the Christmas story without all the "wrappings." And John in his Gospel does the same thing when he writes: "The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us" (1:14). They have simply torn open the package, pulled out the real gift, and thrown away the wrappings.

You see, if we are not careful, even we Christians can be so taken up with the beautiful wrappings of Christmas that we never get around to opening the gift. And while there certainly are many amazing parts of the Christmas story in the other two Gospels, Mark (and John) keep our focus clearly on the number one essential gift: Jesus Christ, the Son of God. All the other "characters" in the story fade in significance!

Don't hold the wrappings so close to your heart that you have "no room" for the Christ Child, the Son of God, the Word made flesh.

Wayne Muckel
Retired

December 20

Wrestling

There are times that I find myself wrestling with God.

I'm not really much given to melancholy or depression, but there are times I find myself frustrated. Not so much down or "blue," but more feeling as though life just hasn't happened the way that I thought it should have. And, of course, life should always happen just as I think it should. My preferences are, quite obviously, the highest good, which is why I operate best as my own lord. Oh, wait...

Because I recognize the Lordship of Jesus, but I also long for things to go the way that I think they should, there are times I'm stuck in the wrestling. I wrestle to see God's good in the midst of my frustration. I wrestle to see the extremely cloudy "big picture" when I'm much more captured by the broken pieces I feel like I can see very clearly. I wrestle with fears, identity, direction, longings. I wrestle with myself, I suppose, even as I wrestle with the God who is leading me.

But here's the thing I've come upon this Advent season: it's only because God has come near that I wrestle.

It's not necessary for me to wrestle with a distant, transcendent deity who is removed from my everyday life—there's no purpose in it. If Jesus doesn't understand and purpose my day-to-day and moment-to-moment, then I don't need to wrestle with Him in my day-to-day and moment-to-moment. If God remains far off, I can safely do as I please. In that instance, I might wrestle with disappointment with myself, frustration at a situation, anger at others, or apathy about the future, but I certainly wouldn't be wrestling with God. I would look inward for a better version of myself—to find the strength that Nietzsche said was within me. I would seek to orchestrate the details of my life; to control, to manipulate, to organize, but certainly never to surrender. If God hadn't come near, I would often turn inward, but I would have no need to turn upward.

But God has come near. In Jesus, God became a baby. Who grew into a child. Who learned by trial and error, who was taught obedience, who was tempted in every way, who grew into a man. A Man, who, at least at one moment in time, on a dark night in a garden, wrestled with God as well. A Man who was obedient to death, even death on a cross. A Man who was raised by God, first from the grave, and then to heavens. A Man who intercedes for me moment by moment, and is involved in the intimate details of my life. Which, of course, is why I wrestle.

So, when I wrestle with God, I'm learning to be thankful that I can. It's hard sometimes.

But I know He's good.

Brian Kannel
Lead Pastor, York Alliance Church

December 21

To Be With Us

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

Philippians 2:6-8

I have been one to struggle with Christmas, mostly because of the commercialization of it, but partly because people can easily get excited about the baby and then completely avoid the true reason that Jesus came to us—to die in our place. My heart is broken by the sacrifice of our Savior with his death on the cross for me. But what about the sacrifice that Jesus made at Christmas? For the creator of the world to humble himself to be constrained by a human body, especially as an embryo and infant, and be solely dependent on a teenage girl, is also an overwhelming sacrifice. Yet that was the attitude of Christ. To make himself nothing. To be a servant. Out of love for us.

Let us be sure to take time to consider the magnitude of the step he took to be “with us,” and may it spur us on to have Christ’s mindset as ours and be servants this season.

Duane Stine

**Assistant to the District Superintendent for Administration and Finance
Eastern PA District Office**

December 22

Christmas Breezes

*She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus,
because he will save his people from their sins.*

Matthew 1:21

For those nations of the earth which have known the story of Jesus, Christmas is undoubtedly the most beautiful time of the year.

Though the celebration of the Savior's birth occurs in the dead of winter, when in many parts of the world the streams are frozen and the landscapes cold and cheerless, still there is beauty at the Christmas season—not the tender beauty of spring flowers or the quiet loveliness of the full-blown summer, or yet the sad sweet graces of autumn colors. It is beauty of another kind, richer, deeper and more elevating, that beauty which considerations of love and mercy bring before the mind.

Though we are keenly aware of the abuses that have grown up around the holiday season, we are still not willing to surrender this ancient and loved Christmas Day to the enemy. Though those purer emotions which everyone feels at Christmas are in most hearts all too fleeting, yet it is something that a lost and fallen race should pay tribute, if only for a day, to those higher qualities of the mind—love and mercy and sacrifice and a life laid down for its enemies. While men are able to rise even temporarily to such heights, there is hope that they have not yet sinned away their day of grace. A heart capable of admiring and being touched by the story of the manger birth is not yet abandoned, however sinful it may be. There is yet hope in repentance.

Thought: Fleeting though it may be amidst all the commercialism and secularism, there is the gentle breeze reminding celebrants of the true meaning of Christmas. Christ has come! In Him there is forgiveness and life.

A.W. Tozer

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December 23

The Price of Bethlehem

The story of the birth of Jesus usually has a line in it somewhere that mentions the fact that Jesus left Heaven to come to earth and be born in human form. True.

Since leaving the sinless perfection of Heaven is a mere concept for me, I can only imagine what it must have been like for Jesus Christ to do so. Let's imagine together for a moment the changes that occurred in His life.

In coming to earth, Jesus moved away from the comfortable and embraced the uncomfortable. At a fundamental level Jesus began to experience basic things that He had never experienced before. He got hungry and tired for the first time ever. He experienced thirst and physical pain. His days had been spent receiving the adoration of legions of angels. That was replaced with the stumbling and bumbling behavior of His disciples. He observed the fallen world from a brand new perspective as one of the citizens of the planet. Finally, He endured the ultimate in humanity's powerlessness, death. All this without mentioning the change in His relationship with His Father as God turned His back on Him on the cross. In a word, Jesus was **humbled** over and over again by His daily routines as an earthbound man.

Have you ever observed a powerful man or woman attempt a very ordinary endeavor like shopping for their own groceries or milking a cow? No matter how noble the effort, the end result is usually awkward and humbling.

The driving force behind this adventure was a motivation of love that compelled Him to suffer loss for the benefit of those who lived in the darkness of sin. Theirs would be the victory at the expense of His loss.

Luke 6:38 gives us the vision for His mission. *For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me.* But John 20:21 takes the concept of Jesus' mission a step further: *As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.*

In the same format that caused Jesus to leave the comfort, safety, and security of Heaven to come to earth, we have been called to walk away from the comfort and security of our lives in order to advance the mission of God on earth.

Thus, we part company with dear friends in a small group in order to launch a new one that will attract people previously uninvolved. We leave the shores of America and fly tens of thousands of miles away to minister to people who may not ever appreciate us and our work among them. We teach a class instead of attending one and we help a needy neighbor who will never be able to help us.

We stay later, give more, go the extra mile, help the helpless, and endure the insults that we have no business receiving; all for the sake of the One who did the same thing previously. We have been sent just as He was sent.

His willingness to pay the price of Bethlehem has been duly noted and celebrated. My willingness to reflect His mission has a long way to go.

Tim Keller
Lead Pastor, Carlisle Alliance Church

December 24

The Question of Christmas

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!

Luke 2:14 ESV

Amidst the erupting joy of angels, a question emerges. Peace is on the horizon, but it's not good will for everyone as implied by Linus in the Charlie Brown Christmas special. It's a peace that is only for those with whom God is pleased.

And so the question must be asked. With whom is God pleased? Or more specifically, how do we please the Lord so that we may participate in His peace? This question is central to the good news of Jesus that the angel of the Lord had announced just moments before and it has one simple answer: God is pleased with those who trust Him.

Jesus was crystal clear about this when He said that the work of God is to believe in the One He sent (John 6:29). The writer of Hebrews states, "***Without faith it is impossible to please Him***" (11:6) and the Apostle Paul affirms this in writing, "*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing*" (Romans 15:13).

The most important question of Christmas is "Do I trust God?" Trust in scripture is not just a feel-good, private trust that gets us through tough times. It's a trust that produces the "obedience of faith" (Romans 1:5). It's a fruit-producing trust that leads us to act justly and to love mercy as Micah describes (6:8) and John the Baptist prescribes (Luke 3:7-14). The even greater beauty of Christmas is not just that we can receive the blessing of Christ through faith, but that His blessing can flow through us to bless the world. May we be blessed and be a blessing all year long!

Alan Rathbun
Assistant to the District Superintendent for Church Planting and Coaching
Eastern PA District Office

December 25

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

*"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."*

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

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived.

Luke 2:1-21

Merry Christmas