

Our Borning Cries



Holy Day Homilies for Advent 2020

Love, Penny

Introduction

The Promise of New Life

We are born to the earth, to a certain set of parents, and to several communities. After a time, although our bodies will die, our faith assures us we will share in the promise of resurrection. So, in a way, our lives are linear; we move through a temporal space from an earthly beginning to an earthly ending, yet within this pattern we participate in innumerable cyclical movements:

Every few seconds, millions of cells in our bodies and a host of microscopic organisms within us are being born and are dying.

Every 24 hours, our earth turns (rotates) on its axis, a movement we perceive as light and darkness, day and night.

Every 365 days or so, our earth revolves around our sun, a movement we perceive as seasonal changes. Our relationship with the planet, among a host of other things, provides several variations and reversals within this pattern.

In our Christian tradition, we also circle the liturgical year, beginning the first week of Advent. Our church seasons move from Advent to Christmas to Epiphany to Lent to Easter to Pentecost, and on through several months known as "regular time," until we reach Advent again. In the last quarter of this last period, we Disciples, along with others, also celebrate Children's Sabbath, Communion Sunday, Reformation Sunday, All Saints Day, Christ the King Sunday, and Thanksgiving. Thematically, we move from the birth of a child to the coronation of a king, from longing and waiting to giving thanks. Since there are 12 of these seasons, one rich prayer exercise might be to spend a day, 12 waking hours, moving through each of these hour by hour, beginning with Advent and closing with Thanksgiving. This yearly cycle, mirroring our life journey,

begins with a gestation, a waiting, a birth, preparation for a death, a death, and a resurrection which enables us to grow, flower and bear spiritual fruit.

Bearing life in our physical bodies is one way to give life, to "birth," but there are countless other ways to nourish, nurture and bring forth life. We have many opportunities, both hidden and revealed, to bear fruit and flourish throughout our lives.

Our faith tradition celebrates that this child born at Christmas is God in human flesh, born to humans, perhaps the most vulnerable and dependent of all species on the earth. This is both frightening and awe-inspiring. The church has always affirmed God's humanity is borne out in the life of the beloved son, Jesus Christ, and that this child will grow up to bear on the Cross what we humans could not bear, our own brokenness and sin.

We cannot imagine such birth pangs. Jesus dies loving us, his enemies, and those he trusted most who also abandoned him in his most vulnerable state. Such love and forgiveness are strong enough to birth us into God's heart, which, according to Julian of Norwich, is what Christ does on the Cross; through his suffering and love, he gives birth to us (Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, Chapter 59, in *Showings*, Colledge and Walsh Translation, Paulist Press, NY, Toronto, 1978).

Many of us are familiar with the beloved hymn, "I Was There to Hear Your Borning Cry," by John Ylvisaker. Before the merger of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the American Lutheran Church (ALC) in 1985 asked John to write a song for a series on baptism. The first tune didn't seem to match the lyrics, so he was asked to "personalize it." According to Ylvisaker's website, the work of "changing a completed work into something else" began. The original "false labor" later gave way to the 'birth' of 'I Was There to Hear Your Borning Cry,' which is now included in songbooks all around the

world"(www.johnylvisaker.com). John died in 2017, leaving the world with more than 1,000 copyrighted musical compositions.

The title of our collection, however, draws its primary inspiration from the *Book of Job, chapter 38*. Job, you will remember, is in anguish and questions God about why he must suffer so much. God does not provide the direct response which Job desires, but rather answers with a series of questions which finally open Job's eyes and heart, and hopefully ours, to both the love and the power of our Creator. God begins by asking Job, "Do you know when the mountain goats give birth? Do you observe the calving of the deer? Can you number the months that they fulfil, and do you know the time when they give birth when they crouch to give birth to their offspring, and are delivered of their young?" (Job 38: 1-3). Job at last comes to understand. If our Maker is there with the lone mountain goat on the cliff and the deer in the forest, then surely God is with each of us and hears all our 'borning' cries.

When Jesus is born again this year, we might celebrate his birth in several ways. He has come to *glorify and accomplish his Father's will*. He has come to *us*. He has come *for us*. He has come to *live and grow in us*. Ultimately, he is born to show us the Father and the Father's will for us. He has come to birth us again into God's heart. He is born, then, with the will of the Father, by the power of the Spirit, to us and for us.

This Advent, I invite you to join me in reimagining what it might be like to have Jesus born through God's will and by the Spirit's power to us and for us. To do that, I have chosen some images from our earliest days and months on the earth to serve as spiritual guides. My life has moved in that direction recently with the births of my two grandchildren. I 're-lived' some parts of gestation with their mothers. I watched one grandchild come from the womb, and because COVID prevented my being in the room for the birth of my second grandchild, I pictured the scene with each of his dad's phone updates, while babysitting

the older "sister," - our four-legged Polly. I, like many of you, have watched little ones strain to see when all was a blur, hold on tight to the smallest finger, track, cry, squeal, struggle to turn over, savor a variety of foods, crawl, pull up, spit up, drool, go for the pacifier, reach, release, survive fevers and infections, and a host of other things. Some of you have borne the life-threatening illnesses which wracked the tiny bodies of those you loved the most, and some of you have borne the loss of those fragile lives. God comes to earth again this Advent to heal all that.

All our experiences with the fragility and preciousness of life possess the power to bear us into a deeper life and to birth us over and over into God's heart. And that is what Advent is - the opportunity to witness the birth of the One who came to "hear our borning cries." My prayer is each of us will hear an invitation to be born once more by the child who was born to us, and who died for us, to make it so.



**Unless otherwise indicated, the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, 1995, will be used throughout, which is accessed through Oremus Bible Browser at bible.oremus.org.*



The Spirit and Body of Christmas

We can try to make it,
Or take it,
Or fake it,
Or mistake it,
Invent it,
Resent it,
Buy it,
Sell it,
Commercialize it,

Hoard it,
Abuse it,
Manipulate it,
Ignore it,
Forget it,
Or lose it -
The Spirit and Body of Christmas.

But when the Word falls again like new snow
Where it will,
When the breath of God blows over the manger
Bringing us once more
That One Gift, That Little Life,
That Body, that Blood, That Spirit
That Baby,
Fresh and pristine from God's heart-
Not his guardian or envoy or substitute or steward
Not his publicist, or personal assistant,
Not his manager or spokesperson
Not his CEO or warden or dictator-
Only that Child, that Babe,
Purely given,
And when we see him for who he is,
There it is - Hope!
There it is -Peace!
There it is - Joy!
There it is - Love!
Wherever he is.



Nov. 29 The First Sunday of Advent
Lighting the Candle of Hope

_____ On this first Sunday of Advent, we are tempted to trust in many things - news reports or medical advances towards a vaccination for COVID. Instead, Lord, we ask you to help us remember *Isaiah 49:23*: "Those who hope in me will not be disappointed."

_____ And these words from *Romans 8:24*, "For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?"

_____ God, we know you hear our cries for security and safety. Child of Bethlehem, restore our hope that you have come again to bring us to life this Advent.

_____ Holy Babe of Bethlehem, we trust you in these times of turmoil and uncertainty to care for us, our country, and our world.

_____ May our hope rest in you.

UNISON: Now we light the Candle of Hope. As we hold the fire to the wick, we know you will come, Holy Child, to kindle the flame of hope in our hearts!



Nov. 30 Mon. The Long Gestation

"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption." (Galatians 4:4-5)

According to some scientists, the opossum has the shortest gestation period- from 12 to 13 days. The elephant has the longest gestation period of all mammals- 645 days or over a year and a half. ("Shortest and Longest Mammal Pregnancies, #Britannica File, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=142XXucQB94>). But that is nothing compared to the time God's people waited for the promised one to come and redeem them from all their trouble.

Most will associate the word *gestate* with "carrying or holding," more specifically, "carrying in the womb." If we look deeper, however, at the root word *gest*, we see something remarkable. *Gest* denotes something grand, a "famous deed, great

adventure, or achievement." Some etymologists link *gest* to 'agere' or the root 'ag,' which means "to set in motion, to do, to accomplish" (<https://www.etymonline.com/word/gest>).

Gestation, then, is not the exclusive experience of those who give physical birth. It is not limited to those who will bear children; rather, it is a gift from God to all longing to celebrate the fullness of a God who comes to bring all our lives to marvelous fruition!

Surely Jesus' birth is the grand story and the greatest divine adventure in human history. This birth was set in motion long before Mary was visited by Gabriel with the unparalleled news that she had been chosen to birth the Son of God to our world. This baby Jesus is precious, because he is God's begotten, the only begotten, and Jesus is a long time coming. When a baby is born, parents have such dreams and hopes. Jesus is precious because God will risk losing him to fulfill the vision our Creator has for all creation. God will risk losing him to avoid losing countless others, some who could care less. God risks a greater nightmare than any parent could imagine. God risks the world Jesus is "born unto" forgetting him, abusing him, betraying him, denying him, plotting against him, slandering him, beating him, and killing him. God even risks having those closest to his son deny, betray, and abandon him. And they do.

Still, Jesus will come to us. He will come to many who will not receive him. God, in the fullness of time, found a way to bring his beloved son to earth, and our Creator will continue to surprise us with the possibility of new life growing within. Life in the Spirit is an endless cycle of gestation and bringing forth, carrying, bearing, birthing, and sharing life, over and over again!

Prayer: Bearer of all Life, for the babe who is born of Your will, we praise you! For the babe who is born to us and for us, we thank you! Continue, Loving Creator, to hear our birthing cries and birth us once more into your Heart. In Your Beloved Son's Name, we pray, Amen.

Ah!

Ah!

That is all we can say when new life comes to us.

When, out of the cold snow a yellow crown shivers in the early air,

The first jonquil that shouldn't make it through the hard earth
Does.

God is there to see the first poking of the fragile sprout

Pushing up in desolate lands,

Believing it can live where climate says it shouldn't.

Creator, father, mother, midwife,

God is always there, when life first comes forth, when

Out in the freezing sleet, the fox has its first kit,

The seal, her pup, the penguin its chick, the bear her cub,

God is always there when

On an unforgiving mountain ledge, the goat births her kid;

God is there

To deliver each one-

The zebra her foal, the turkey her poult, the turtle her
hatchling.

The starfish its larva, the swan its swanling,

The frog its pollywog, the pig its shoat,

The oyster its spat, the salmon its smolt,

The falcon its eya, the tiger its whelp.

God is there to labor and help

An old world, hard and barren and cold,

Quiver and shake again with joy

That there is more inside its belly than it knew,

And

To see this boy, wrapped in unforgiving flesh,

To see this baby, first from God's heart,

Laid like so many creatures

In straw,

The Word that gave every form its life

Every first, its hope.

To see the Spirit come to us this way-

Ah!



Dec. 1 Tues. Losing and Finding our Children

"For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." (Luke 19:10)

Someone has said that Christmas is for children. In a way, that's true. God has come to find all of us lost children. Eight months ago, I sat with a woman who had known much loss - her husband, her health, and her confidence; but her greatest pain was her broken relationship with her only son. "I have lost him so many times," she said, "not just once." She had lost him to family members who had betrayed his trust, to friends that were not really friends, to addictive substances that promised escape but paralyzed his body and will. She herself had lost trust and faith too as he continued to crawl in his shame and blame into many dark places. COVID has only served to widen the gap, and her greatest fear, she shared, was that he was forever lost to himself, to her, to others and to God.

Christmas is God's loud proclamation to that woman and others who fear losing their children to life's tumult, "I am coming to do a new thing. I am sending my son, my own self, to find your son and your daughter, to find each of you. I am coming down there to a humble couple in an unremarkable manger to do a *remarkable* thing."

This God, exuberant with joy in birthing the world, knows the deep anguish of losing creation in the flood. God, through Noah, offers a womb of protection, the Ark, to carry humanity through the tempestuous flood waters. Using this analogy, it might be possible to imagine that the world "miscarried." The flood is a turning point in God's relationship with humanity. After the flood, God decides to risk everything precious so his

children won't die, to do whatever was necessary to offer life to everyone.

After the flood, God will call one man to begin rebuilding God's vision of blessing creation. That man was Abraham. Ellen Davis, theologian with Duke Divinity, believes God hopes Abraham will be different than those who came before, and can be trusted to do something foreshadowing what God will eventually do -risk losing a son to save the promised vision (See Ellen Davis, "Vulnerability, the Condition of the Covenant," *The Art of Reading Scripture*, Eds. Ellen Davis and Richard Hays, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2003, 277-93).

Will Abraham place his faith in the promise as he understands it, or will he place his faith in the One who promises? That is the question. In a heart-wrenching story, we learn he will trust the One who promises more than he will trust his own understanding of the promise itself. When Abraham is called to sacrifice his own son, Isaac, he takes the boy up the mountain to prepare to offer him to God. Abraham trusts God to preserve both Isaac and the promise, and so when Isaac asks about the sacrifice, Abraham responds, "The Lord will provide." God is free to be who God will be. In choosing a people to bear the promise, God continues to realize the vision of saving his children *from their sins* rather than losing them *to their sins*.

Our Creator bore the long years of anguish carried by Sarah, Rachel, Hannah, Samson's mother, Elizabeth, and others, who had given up hope of ever bearing children. God also mourned - and still mourns - the infanticide initiated by the Egyptian Pharaoh, and later by the Roman Herod, as well as the loss of many children killed in ancient Israel's wars, and the suffering and death of all children everywhere and in every time and place.

God has borne the loss of every child who did not make it. Rachel is the beloved wife of Jacob who, like Sarah, comes to

be the symbolic mother for all Israel's children. In Jeremiah 31:15, the prophet writes that Rachel "weeps and refuses to be comforted" for all the children lost through wars, exile, diaspora, sacrificial rituals to pagan gods, through miscarriage, poverty, abortion, violence, abuse, and oppressions of many kinds. God even mourns for Israel's enemy Moab; according to Jeremiah 48:36, God's heart "moans...like a flute" for Moab and the people of Kir-heres in their destruction.

Christmas is an unimaginable, unthinkable story of hope. It is the story of God bringing peace to a violent world by offering this world his own self, his own son, in the most vulnerable and dependent way, as a tiny baby. And this offering, according to one reading of I Peter 3:18-22, is extended not only to those who died in the flood, but to all who came before:

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him (I Peter 3:18-22).

I don't know what you have lost, who you have lost or what you mourn. Perhaps you too have known moments when you found no comfort in others' words or even prayer. Perhaps the pain or remorse you carry seems too heavy. Perhaps you are uncertain how to heal or if you will heal. There are moments you may even feel abandoned by God. In *The Crucified God*, theologian Jurgen Moltmann writes, "When God becomes man in Jesus of Nazareth, he not only enters into the finitude of man, but in his death on the cross also enters into the situation of man's godforsakenness." God understands what it feels like when his

children experience radical disconnection from him, when his children *lose him*. God has lost much too. And those losses continue wherever there is violence in the world, violence to bodies and violence to emotions and spirits. Christmas is the story of God's unwillingness to lose another child and God's willingness to give the beloved son to save each one. That's how much God loves you and every person in this world. That's how much.

I received a call last week from the woman I described in the opening paragraph. Her voice was trembling with excitement. "He's coming home," she said. "He's driving two days to get here for Christmas. I haven't seen him for five years, but he's coming home. Please pray he really gets here."

And so, I will. God never stops looking for him or for any who are lost. I pray as he drives through towns, he will notice a few golden angels blowing their horns from those chilly lampposts which he might otherwise be tempted to ignore. I pray he will see a new light in the trees shining through windows and from the wreathes brightening darkened doors. I pray he will see a few humble mangers there in some cold yards and that his radio will lead him to tunes about being home for Christmas, chestnuts roasting on open fires, wise men coming from afar, about those who couldn't imagine they could find faith, but glimpsing a slice of it somehow, and I pray he will come alongside the fearful and faithful toiling their way again to Bethlehem. I pray he makes it back to the manger and to the baby lying there. And I pray he makes it back home to a mother who has loved him from the moment she knew he was inside her and will love him even after she leaves earth, and to a God who loved him even before anyone knew him and offers him a love which will live on past all human memories.

I pray he will see Christmas for what it is- *God's unwillingness* to lose him and *God's willingness* to give his own son to show him so.

Prayer: Bearer of all Life, for the babe who is born of Your will, we praise you! For the babe who is born to us and for us, we thank you! Continue, Loving Creator, to hear our borning cries and birth us once more into your Heart. In Your Beloved Son's Name, we pray, Amen.



Dec. 2 Wed. Unbearable

"Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.' (Luke 2:34-35).

In *Matthew's Gospel*, Gabriel brings Mary the news that she will bear God's son, news that at first must have seemed "unbearable." She, an unmarried virgin, will bear God's son. In addition, she is given this prophetic word from Simeon. Her child is destined to turn the world upside down - some will fall and some will rise. He will "be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed." What does all this mean? But that's not all: "a sword will pierce" her own soul too. What's more, she has some 33 years to ponder this mysterious word in her heart. What is this sword that will pierce her soul and perhaps her body? It takes courage to bear a sudden word from an angel that you are chosen to bear God's son. It also may take more courage to live with a burdensome word you do not understand for many years. She will bring forth new life by bearing God's son. But this prophecy from Simeon - how will *this heavy word* bring forth new life?

Not everything we bear in our lives seems to produce new life. How many times have you said, thought or felt, "I can't bear it anymore. I just can't take anymore"? Have you had moments like that in your life? Maybe you have heard someone close to you

say that. More and more in this season feel pressed down. Their loads feel too heavy.

Early on, when Cain must leave Eden, wandering the earth as a vagabond after killing his brother, he proclaims in desperation, "My punishment is greater than I can bear" (Gen. 4:13). He is sent east of Eden. He will be cut off from his family. Will they ever forgive him? Is there no hope for reconciliation? Will he lose his life because he took his brother's life? God's mark upon him is really a mercy which spares him from being hunted down for his crime. But what will become of him? Cain is lost. Who will find him? How will he find himself?

Have you known the guilt of bearing up under an action you cannot undo? In Ancient Israel, sacrifices were taken to the temple to cover sins. In *Exodus 28:29*, the priest Aaron is told to "bear the names of the sons of Israel on the breastplate," carrying "the judgment of the sons of Israel over his heart" and "bearing their names on his two shoulders as a memorial before the Lord." In addition, those who "bore" the ark of the covenant re-enacted God's deliverance of the slaves from Egyptian bondage, for when the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped into the edge of the water, the flood stood heaped up. Twelve stones stand today at the edge of the Jordan in the place where the feet of the priests stood. (*Joshua 3:13, Joshua 3:15*). I must mention here the wonderful sermon Tom preached on All Saints Day, comparing the saints who have gone before to those priests. Like those priests who held back the waters until all of Israel passed through safely, the saints through prayer are still "holding back the waters" for us so we will be able to cross over safely.

The prophet Ezekiel later claimed God instructed him to "bear" the sins of Israel through a rather unusual discipline. He is to lie on his left side, bearing the punishment of the house of Israel for 390 days. Then, Ezekiel is to lie down a second time

on his right side, bearing the punishment of the house of Judah for 40 days, one day for each year (*Ezekiel* 4:4-6).

Maybe you are weary from bearing too many responsibilities on your own. Moses, confronting many challenges leading the children from Egypt and contending with their complaints in the wilderness, asks in *Deut.* 1:12, "How can I bear the heavy burden of your disputes all by myself?" Like the Psalmist, perhaps you are tired of bearing insults from your enemies (*Ps.* 13:2) or worse still, from your friends (*Ps.* 55:12-13).

Israel's experiences of exile and oppression are several times compared to the pain of giving birth or of false labor. The writer of *Is.* 21:3 laments, "Therefore my loins are filled with anguish; like the pangs of a woman in labour, I am bowed down so that I cannot hear; I am dismayed so that I cannot see." In *Is.* 37, when King Hezekiah hears of a possible threat from Assyria, he sends this desperate word to the prophet Isaiah, "This day is a day of distress, of rebuke, and of disgrace; children have come to birth, and there is no strength to bring them forth. (*Is.* 37:3).

Others bear the heavy burden of resentment and imagined violence against an enemy. The psalmist asks God to abandon the enemy to bear their own sin (*Ps.* 5:10) or prays that the enemy will be barren. The prophet Hosea vacillates between prophecies of hope or doom both for Israel and her enemies (Consider both Hosea 3:16 and 11:3).

Even God has grown weary bearing the ingratitude of his children in the wilderness and a parade of empty rituals from those whose hearts have grown cold (*Amos* 5:21-23, *Jer.* 6:20, *Is.* 66:1-3).

As I write this, we are witnessing tension, anxiety, uncertainty, and unrest in many places; resentment, bitterness, suspicion, paranoia, and imagined vengeance against an adversary seem to

be the national norm. Maintaining these damaging emotions is a fruitless "labor" which destroys healing and the possibility for reconciliation and new beginnings. Humans cannot bear up well or long under their weight.

Jesus is born to bear what is unbearable for us humans. Take a moment to reflect on what feels too heavy for you now. Bring to mind those frustrated attempts to bring forth something new as you "sit with" the reassuring words of *Is. 46:3-4*:

"Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from your birth, carried from the womb; Even to your old age I am he, even when you turn grey I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save."

Prayer: Bearer of all Life, for the babe who is born of Your will, we praise you! For the babe who is born to us and for us, we thank you! Continue, Loving Creator, to hear our borning cries and birth us once more into your Heart. In Your Beloved Son's Name, we pray, Amen.



Dec. 3 Thurs. 'Bearing' Us

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." (Isaiah 9:6-7, NIV)

This child is born for us, the writer of Isaiah proclaims, and he will bear much on his shoulders. Most translations of *Isaiah* use the phrase, "and the government will be on his shoulders." Especially in our world and country in this moment, that is not an easy load to bear. The *NRSV* uses the phrase, "the authority rests on his shoulders," suggesting the mantles which Elijah and Elisha wore.

Ps. 68:19 blesses the Lord for daily bearing us up. The hymn "Eagles' Wings" celebrates a God who bears us upward like an eagle bears its young above dangerous cliffs and predators, lest we fall, "dashing our foot against a stone." (*Ps. 91:12*). Most memorable are those passages from *Isaiah* on the Suffering Servant, often read as a prefiguration of Jesus: "Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities." The writer goes on:

"Surely He has borne our griefs
And carried our sorrows;
Yet we esteemed Him stricken,
Smitten by God, and afflicted.
But He was wounded for our transgressions,
He was bruised for our iniquities;
The chastisement for our peace was upon Him,
And by His stripes we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
We have turned, every one, to his own way;
And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all." (*Is. 53:3-6*)

Every Christmas, we enjoy Miriam Clarke singing the well-known song by Mark Lowry, "Mary, Did You Know?" You will perhaps remember the second stanza:

"Did you know that your baby boy
Has come to make you new?
This child that you've delivered
Will soon deliver you?"

Once we bore the "image of the man of dust"; in Christ, we are given the opportunity to "bear the image of the man of heaven." (*I Corinthians 15:49*). On our own, as James writes, we would continue to "give birth to sin," which, "when fully grown, gives birth to death" (*James 1:15*). But now, Jesus has come to bear the sins of many (*Isaiah 53:11*) and will come to earth again to "save those who are eagerly waiting for him" (*Hebrews 9:28*).

I don't know what you are bearing - or who you are forbearing - but Jesus has come to carry all that and more. He has come to hold your grief, your sin, and your sorrow. Offer all that to him this Christmas. Offer all that to him right now.

Prayer: Bearer of all Life, for the babe who is born of Your will, we praise you! For the babe who is born to us and for us, we thank you! Continue, Loving Creator, to hear our borning cries and birth us once more into your Heart. In Your Beloved Son's Name, we pray, Amen.



Dec. 4 Fri. Born of God

"The angel answered her [Mary], "The Holy Spirit will come to you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the holy child developing inside you will be called the Son of God." (Luke 1:35)

"See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." (I John 3:1a)

Every family rejoices in the birth of a child. When my granddaughter Margaret was born in 2018, we all started pulling out old baby pictures, exclaiming who she looked like. When Charlie was born in March of 2020, he looked just like his daddy. "No doubt who *his* father is!" Now others exclaim how much like his mother he looks. Sometimes our resemblances change as we grow older.

Before God took us in hand, we looked a lot like dust. Jesus comes to be born "in us" and transform our image into his likeness. God's knowledge of Jeremiah predates his birth, according to Jeremiah 1:4-5: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you."

Even so, Israel has forgotten the one who born them, following idols as if they were their "true parents." They have "said to a tree, 'You are my father' and to a stone, 'You gave me birth'" (*Jeremiah 2:27*). Nevertheless, in the "time of trouble, they say, 'Come and save us.' But where are your gods that you made for yourself?" (*Jeremiah 2:28*). How often have we "forgotten the one who has born us," following idols as if they were our true parents?

Our salvation will not come from our will, our kin, our desire, or our actions. Our birth does not come from below, though we often look below for our answers, our solutions, or our direction. We are born from above. That is what the adult Jesus will remind Nicodemus when he asks how he can be born again. Speaking very literally, Nicodemus asks how he can enter his mother's womb again. Starting over this way will never help us. We would just find new ways to separate ourselves from God and neighbor. "No," Jesus says, "You must be born from above, born of water and Spirit" (*John 3*). Those who are born this way truly have the power to know God, to love God, and to love neighbor (*I John 4:7*). And there is much more: those who are born this way have the power to believe in Jesus (*I John 5:1*), as well as the faith to conquer (*I John 5:4*).

"You look more and more like your father the older you get," someone may say to you. "I can sure tell whose child you are," another may say. "Those who have seen me," Jesus will proclaim, "have seen the Father" (*John 14:9*). Throughout our lives, we, our children, and grandchildren, will perhaps resemble different relatives at various times. Our prayer is that as this child Jesus grows in us, we will bear his likeness. Our prayer is that by looking at our lives, they will see Jesus and so see the Father, and by looking at us, no one would forget who our Father is.

Prayer: Bearer of all Life, for the babe who is born of Your will, we praise you! For the babe who is born to us and for us, we thank you!

Continue, Loving Creator, to hear our borning cries and birth us once more into your Heart. In Your Beloved Son's Name, we pray, Amen.



Whose Child Are You

Whose child are you,
I wish you knew,
The set of the face,
The bend in your knee,
I wish you could see.

Whose child are you,
I wish you could hear,
The shape of the words,
The voice so clear.

Whose child are you,
I wish you could feel,
The hands as they hold,
The arms as they fold,

Whose child are you,
Through grace may you find
That night song and star,
That leads to the One-
Whose child you are.



Dec. 5 Sat. First Born and First Fruit

"She brought forth her firstborn son..." (Luke 2:17a)

"Christ is the firstborn of all creation." (Colossians 1:15)

"In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures." (James 1:18)

Do you remember the first birth, adoption, or arrival of the first young one, to your family? When a family receives its first child, there are no words to describe the overwhelming experience of humility, joy, and responsibility. Jesus is God's firstborn. Though Jesus had always existed coeternally with the Father, there is this birth moment when Jesus comes to us. We cannot imagine what this moment must have been like for God to witness - *the only begotten son being born to the earth*. We also cannot imagine the moment God lost that son to love - to the love they carried for each other and for each of us. God gives the fruit of *God's own self* so you and I might be born again.

Firstborns in the Biblical story did not always enjoy a privileged position. They were sometimes passed over for younger sons - Esau, because his appetites lay elsewhere; Ishmael, because he is born to a slave woman rather than to Sarah; Joseph's son Manasseh, because Jacob on his deathbed makes a "mistake," which turns out not to be a mistake, by blessing the second son. There is a variety of reasons the first is passed over for another, some transparent, some not. For their own moral failing or from the favoritism of their families and for a whole host of other reasons known only to God, the first sons sometimes do not carry the promise forward.

As the firstborn of God, Jesus will bear the pain of other firstborns who came before. As the first born of creation, he

bears the suffering of first sons. He will bear all the sins of some firstborns that cost them the promise. He will also know what it is like to be rejected, not good enough, marginalized, prejudged, or passed over.

In some cultures, primogeniture was the hierarchical guarantee that the father's estate, wealth, position, and privilege would automatically pass to the firstborn or a designated heir. This ensured that land and wealth would remain in the hands of the wealthy. Jesus' privileged position will not be grounded in the benefits of earthly primogeniture. What happens, instead, is Jesus uses his status as "firstborn" to benefit creation, humanity, and the church:

Christ is the firstborn of all creation (Colossians 1:15).

Christ is the "head of the body, the church; the beginning, and firstborn from the dead. (Colossians 1:18a, Rev. 1:5)

Christ is firstborn from the dead "so he might come to have first place in everything." (Colossians 1:18b)

Christ births us by the word to become first fruits: "In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures." (James 1:18)

This baby born to us at Christmas will not be spared. He will not live an indulged or privileged life. Instead, this child will spare us, sharing his inheritance with us. My prayer is that Christ, the "firstborn from the dead," will come to have first place in everything."

Prayer: Bearer of all Life, for the babe who is born of Your will, we praise you! For the babe who is born to us and for us, we thank you! Continue, Loving Creator, to hear our birthing cries and birth us once more into your Heart. In Your Beloved Son's Name, we pray, Amen.



Dec. 6 The Second Sunday of Advent
 Lighting the Candle of Peace

_____ Lord, come and heal our great divides!

_____ The writer of Is. 52:7 proclaims, "How beautiful
 upon the mountains are the feet of the
 messenger who announces peace, who brings
 good news, who announces salvation, who says to
 Zion, 'Your God reigns.'"

_____ Lord, amid the noise of tumult and rumor and
 fear, let that be the message we bear!

_____ May we hear again, and live again, the words of
 Is. 57:19: "Peace, peace, to the far and the
 Near, says the LORD; and I will heal them."

_____ Oh Lord, heal our hatred and warring hearts!

_____ Heal our bitterness and anger!

_____ Heal our resentment and jealousy!

_____ Heal our apathy and injustice!

_____ Heal the agitation of our spirits!

_____ Speak to our lives once more, "Peace be upon
 you!"

_____ Speak to our hearts once more, "Peace, be still!"

_____ In places of violence, may we be peacemakers and
 peacekeepers.

UNISON: Today we light the second candle of Advent, The
Candle of Peace. As we hold the fire to the wick, come, Holy
Child, to light the flame of peace in our hearts.



Dec. 7 Mon. Not Mine, Not Theirs, Ours

"Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' ²²All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us.' ²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus" (Matthew 1:18-25).

What does it mean to claim a child as your own? Joseph takes Jesus as his own. When we adopt a "my" or "their" mentality, we separate ourselves from those who need us most and from those we need most. When we only care for our own and leave "them" out, whoever we imagine "them" to be, we miss a wonderful opportunity to grow into one people who claim and celebrate the power of "our and ours."

There is a pandemic worse than COVID, worse than any of the plagues that have devastated the earth. It is the malady of "mineness." The world is collapsing under the selfishness of "mineness." "Mineness" declares, "That is not my concern. That is not my problem. That is not my child. That is not my family. That is not my position. That is not my belief. That has not affected my life or mine." The goal of "mineness" is to secure my safety, my privilege, my well-being, and my reputation. Its

purpose is to make me look good without requiring any real sacrifice from me. It masks both my faults and my self-centeredness under the façade of generosity and kindness. It always calculates self-interest above all other interests. It always looks at my bottom line, financially, culturally, socially, and emotionally. "Mineness" cares that people who look like me keep power, privilege, and status. "Mineness" cares only for immediate gratification for those closest to me, for my "kin and kind." "Mineness" may be willing to defer gratification or put another first, but only if these actions benefit me and mine in the long run. "Mineness" is near-sighted, paranoid, and suspicious. Promoting the illusion of scarcity, it hoards and begrudges. "Mineness" cares about having what I want when I want it, without calculating the cost to human bodies and lives or the environment to provide these goods and services. Perpetuating tribalism, it thrives on competition rather than cooperation and collaboration. "Mineness" cares that the earth labors to bring forth resources for the duration of my life, or the lives of my immediate kin, without imagining the long-term suffering of the planet or of others for generations to come. "Mineness" rarely sees beyond one's own yard into the neighborhood, community, across town, or across culture.

But what if we reimagined we are part of a larger family - a larger neighborhood, community, society, earth, world, and cosmos? What if we explored our interconnections and the potential gain if we "worked across" many lines we have consciously or subconsciously drawn around us? How would our actions change if we chose to proclaim: "This is our challenge. This is our opportunity. This is God's invitation to discover a new "our" which could really make a difference"?

Joseph could have said, "This is not my wife or my child or my responsibility." Instead, he decides this child is God's and this family is his. He cares for that family, protects that family, and bears with that family. He decides to join God's great vision to adopt a whole world in this solitary decision to "adopt" God's son

and his mother as his own. In so doing, Joseph models God's loving action in choosing "us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the pleasure of his will" (Eph. 1:5).

Prayer: Bearer of all Life, for the babe who is born of Your will, we praise you! For the babe who is born to us and for us, we thank you! Continue, Loving Creator, to hear our borning cries and birth us once more into your Heart. In Your Beloved Son's Name, we pray, Amen.



Dec. 8 Tues. Life Stirring

"In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy.'" (Luke 1:39-44)

At some point in the beginning of her pregnancy, Mary visits a relative Elizabeth who is also pregnant and near her time of delivery. It would be common for women to help midwife or lend other support to their kin during these times. We remember that when Elizabeth first encounters Mary, the child within Elizabeth's womb, John the Baptist, leaps for joy!

Somewhere between weeks 15 or 16, and even as late as week 25, women report feeling what is termed "quickening." Some studies show that first-time mothers don't feel the quickening as early as mothers who have given birth. That may be true for us spiritually as well. The first time God moves in us, we may not recognize it, but once we have first felt that stirring, we wait for it and we long for it. In the presence of Jesus, John leaps

with joy. Not only is new life stirring physically in Elizabeth's womb, the Spirit is also stirring!

To quicken is to bring life. The *King James Version* used the term *quicken* to describe several powerful movements of God in our biblical story. When I remember Elizabeth, whose body, like Sarah's, was well past childbearing, I am reminded of the verse in *Romans 4:17* referring to Abraham: "As it is written, I have made thee a father of many nations, before him whom he believed, even God, who quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were." If you remember any verses about quickening, it's probably the one from *I Corinthians 15:45*: "And so it is written, 'The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit.'"

The baby Jesus is this "last Adam" who, though dead in the tomb, is quickened to life by the Holy Spirit, and there is more. *Romans 8:11* proclaims, "But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell[s] in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you." Or, as John writes in *5:21*: "Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and quickeneth them, so also the Son quickeneth whomsoever he wishes. (*John 5:21, KJV*). The quickening of Jesus extends beyond the physical. According to *Ephesians 2:1*, "those who were dead in trespasses and sins" are also quickened.

Have you felt this quickening? Some evidence of life where there was none? You have heard the expression of something hurting or cutting "to the quick." According to the explanation in *The Free Dictionary*, when we "touch the quick," we "strike the deepest, most fragile part" of a person.

<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/touched+to+the+quick>).

If someone cuts a finger to the quick, he or she might draw blood. Someone might also be touched to the quick emotionally. That is conveyed in the expression, "His comment cut me to the

quick." When we are touched to the quick, we also may feel our "growing edge" and that experience might be painful.

As the baby grows within the mother, there is stretching and kicking and this expansion often brings discomfort, but in the end, it also brings new life. The process of being brought back from death to life by the power of the Spirit is a marvelous thing, but also unsettling. The writer of I Peter 3:14-18 explains:

"But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh but quickened in the spirit."

Quickening is not limited to those giving physical birth. It is not the birthright only of mothers bearing children. Is God stirring in you right now, quickening new life within? Do you long to feel a new stirring? We thank God for this baby who will give us all a new growing edge, a new Spirit, and a new hope!

Prayer: Bearer of all Life, for the babe who is born of Your will, we praise you! For the babe who is born to us and for us, we thank you! Continue, Loving Creator, to hear our birthing cries and birth us once more into your Heart. In Your Beloved Son's Name, we pray, Amen.



Dec. 9 Wed. Looking Through the Blur

"When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.'" (Luke 2:15)

The shepherds may be the first, other than Mary and Joseph, to look into the eyes of this newborn baby. Much is a blur for newborn babies. Ever wonder what Jesus saw when he looked at his earthly parents? Or the shepherds? Ever wonder what we saw when we first recognized our parents? What our children or grandchildren saw?

Not long ago, I ran across an online post about what babies see- and don't see- at different stages of their development.

According to the American Optometric Association, "infants may look intently at a highly contrasted target, yet babies have not yet developed the ability to easily tell the difference between two targets or move their eyes between the two images" www.aoa.org/healthy-eyes/eye-health-for-life/infant-vision).

Spiritual discernment does not come to us all at once either. I remember a student sharing her struggle to make a difficult decision. Trying to sort through the consequences, she said in exasperation, "It's just all a blur. The minute I think I have it sorted, it all runs together again and I lose my focus." Ever felt that way?

The AOA online article continues to explain: "Depth perception, which is the ability to judge if objects are nearer or farther away than other objects, is not present at birth. It is not until around the fifth month that the eyes are capable of working together to form a three-dimensional view of the world and begin to see in-depth."

Babies aren't the only ones to struggle with this problem. Throughout our adult lives, keeping the right perspective is often challenging. How many times do we have our priorities distorted because we can't distinguish what is near and what

is far? If we are too nearsighted, we lose the ability to see the larger picture. If we are too far-sighted, we fail to attend to what is right before us in the present moment. Without this kind of "depth perception," we might live forever in an imagined future which may never come and miss the day we have. Or we might become so absorbed with our small inner circle that we never look out and away to see many lives and needs beyond our back yards.

It takes the guidance of the Spirit to allow us to see through another set of lenses. One thing in the research should give us hope. Even when a baby's vision is blurred, he keeps looking; she keeps searching. "Their primary focus is on objects 8 to 10 inches from their face or the distance to the parent's face." There are times in life when our perception seems shallow and all becomes a blur. That's all right. Christmas is the good news that Jesus came *to give God a face we humans might see*. He comes face to face with us humans in all our agony and confusion. He brings God's will, God's direction, and God's kingdom in focus.

Do you remember what infants do when they can't see clearly? They wait for that voice they know and that touch they trust. We should do the same. All throughout our lives, we continue to need to discipline ourselves to wait, trust, and focus our gaze upward. It's not easy, but in the end, our reward is clarity and insight.

Prayer: Bearer of all Life, for the babe who is born of Your will, we praise you! For the babe who is born to us and for us, we thank you! Continue, Loving Creator, to hear our borning cries and birth us once more into your Heart. In Your Beloved Son's Name, we pray, Amen.



Dec. 10 Thurs. Rejoicing, Rattling and Drooling

"In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were

terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.'
(Luke 2:8-11)

Babies love rattles. They love the sound and the feel of the vibration. At a certain point, they lose interest - or we think they do - and we pack them away with the bibs and other things as we bring out more age-appropriate toys- you know, more sophisticated contraptions with batteries and those irritating repetitive songs. But the truth is, memories of those rattles dripping with all that drool live on! It's too bad we lose the rattles and it's too bad we forget how to drool.

Many infants drench themselves drooling. It just drips down and down. Soon you are wet too. After the teeth come in, it does get better and at some point, polite society regards drooling a social no-no. So, we quit drooling, except for those occasional moments we wake ourselves from an exhausted sleep.

But what if we recovered the habit? At least the spiritual equivalent? God's good life, profound mercy and grace, are worth salivating over. The passions and talents placed within each of us are surely worth a little drool.

The angels' songs rattle the heavens. All that light and sound frighten the lonely shepherds on the hillside. God coming to earth shakes things up. Heaven has broken open to give the earth an amazing gift. This precious child will rattle the status quo. If we receive him in the way we should, nothing should remain the same. In fact, if Christ's birth does not rattle our routine, we may wonder if we have truly received him.

Your rattle will make a sound all its own. It comes from just the way the Spirit vibrates in your life. It makes a sound like no one else can make. Don't leave it in some baby room. Don't be fooled into thinking it's a plaything, or a simple infantile diversion.

In the new year, rediscover your rattles and learn again how to drool, really salivate, over the goodness of the Lord's gifts to you.

Prayer: Bearer of all Life, for the babe who is born of Your will, we praise you! For the babe who is born to us and for us, we thank you! Continue, Loving Creator, to hear our borning cries and birth us once more into your Heart. In Your Beloved Son's Name, we pray, Amen.



Dec. 11 Fri. Holding and Embracing the Word

"While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." (Luke 2:6-7)

We are adept at losing things. Keys, directions, words of encouragement and good intentions vanish just when we need them. We jot down lists on pieces of paper we lose. Or, we think ourselves clever when we save our notes on our smart phones until we aren't so smart and delete them or forget which file we placed them under! How do we keep something or someone close? How do we hold on to what we wish to keep?

Mary swaddles the word. She wraps it, cherishes it, holds on to both Jesus the child and Jesus the Word which has come to her. How will we hold on?

Consider the powerful Biblical ways Ancient Israel held the Word as it first came to them. They tied the commandments on their forearm or forehead next to the heart: "Bind the words of God always your heart; fasten them around your neck. (Proverbs 6:21). Israel is told to tie the commandments to their fingers and write them on the tablets of their hearts. The binding of the body was a reminder to bind the heart. The

writing on the forehead was a symbol of this deeper etching on the heart.

Jesus has come to us. How do we hold him without holding him back? Paul encourages his readers in Philippians 2:14 to "hold firmly to the word of life" so that on the day of Christ's return, we will rejoice that "we did not run the race in vain."

Another translation of this verse uses the expression "holding forth." Holding forth about politics. Holding forth about this thing or that. When we "hold forth" the Word, we do just the opposite. We yield the floor to Christ. We climb down from our stump and end our speech. Holding forth is the process of yielding to Christ's life in us. Only then can we "hold forth" Christ to others. Mary holds this Word, this child, this Christ. And she does not just hold the Word, she fully receives it. She embraces it. Will we? May God show us how.

Prayer: Bearer of all Life, for the babe who is born of Your will, we praise you! For the babe who is born to us and for us, we thank you! Continue, Loving Creator, to hear our borning cries and birth us once more into your Heart. In Your Beloved Son's Name, we pray, Amen.



Dec. 12 Sat. Tracking his Father

*"Listen, children, to a father's instruction,
and be attentive, that you may gain insight;" (Proverbs 4:1)*

*"Let your heart hold fast my words;
keep my commandments, and live.
Get wisdom; get insight: do not forget, nor turn away
from the words of my mouth." (Proverbs 4b-5)*

In ninth grade science class, we usually listened to about 20 minutes of a recorded presentation. There was a lively song

introducing each session which all the boys in class drummed to. I can still hear that song. Then our entertaining teacher would present the lesson. For some reason, I remember the day our teacher taught us about sound vibrations, the ear, and how we hear. He came out with props to illustrate the bones in the ear. He explained about the outer, middle, and inner ear and their functions, not only to transmit sound waves eventually to the brain, but also to maintain balance through a series of canals/tubes which carried fluid. If things were out of balance, we might not hear well, and worse, we might not even be able to walk straight or stay on our feet. Our teacher staggered and pretended to fall to demonstrate.

There is this profound moment we don't have access to in the Christmas story, the moment Jesus hears his first words as an earthly infant. The Word which has always existed, was with God and was God, the Word which brought everything to life, now comes to earth in a body with human ears! He will hear the vibrations of human voices for the first time through this tiny ear canals.

At some point when infants are taken in for early medical checkups, hearing tests are given. Usually a loud clap will cause the baby to turn in the direction of the sound. Sometimes the sound startles the infant. When we hear something unexpected, we often are surprised or alarmed. We "start," as the saying goes.

At some later point, a baby will "track," or turn, in the direction of the sound. One of the things I remember from spending time with my grandchildren Margaret and Charlie is how they got better and better at tracking our voices as they grew. When they turned in the direction of our voices, they also were often turning to face us. A baby learns to follow the voice and soon connects the voice with the face.

As he grows, Jesus will hear many other voices, many antagonistic. At the end of his life, a mob will cry, "Crucify him." Through it all, there is the one voice he listens to above all others - the voice of his Father.

My prayer is we will track God this way. Amid much noise, much confusion, and many voices, some pleasing and some unpleasing, some encouraging and some scathing, some constructive and some destructive, may we receive God's guidance. The balance of our lives depends upon that. It is the difference between staggering and falling and keeping our feet steady on the path set before us.

Prayer: Bearer of all Life, for the babe who is born of Your will, we praise you! For the babe who is born to us and for us, we thank you! Continue, Loving Creator, to hear our borning cries and birth us once more into your Heart. In Your Beloved Son's Name, we pray, Amen.



Listening for Ancient Oceans and More

It looked like an ear,
This large shell washed to shore,
Its spirals curling inward to some place I could not see.
And so, I picked it up and held it to my ear,
Listening for ancient oceans and more.

Oh, to cup our ears against
The Spirit's secret place and listen.
Listen for some deeper deep,
For that time before time

When just a Word caused
Winds to rush
And waters to gush,
Glistening as they ebbed away
From land,

And earth stretching out,
To dry her drenched body
In a new light.

Oh, to cup our ears against
The heart of God and
Listen for that Word that spoke
Life before there was Life,

Listen, hoping
A new wave will come and draw us back
To that moment before moments,
Before we crushed the Word to pieces,
Eroding it like grains of sand,
Into shards of tiny syllables that cut and jab.

Oh, to hear and see again
That moment Spirit brooded
And Word brought forth a wobbly world
Wet from the womb,

Fresh and washed with the hope
That the Maker of all might pick us up
And hold us close enough,
Friend and foe,

Close enough to press our ears
To our Creator's chest,
The heart from which we sprang,
And hear again the hum and roar
Of that first breath
Sent out over Chaos-
Sent out over Nothing-
To make Something.
That first breath rising and falling;

Leaning in to hear together
Above the fray,
Above the noise,
Drowning out the rest,
Bringing out our best;

Then,

We might follow love's winding way
Whorling and folding
Its way inside
To some purer joy
Vibrating in the center,

Where together
We hear
Our one heart
Beating.

It looked like an ear,
This large shell washed to shore,
Its spirals curling to some place I could not see.
And so, I picked it up and held it to my ear,
Listening for ancient oceans and more.



Dec. 13 The Third Sunday of Advent Lighting the Candle of Joy

_____ Lord, we need your joy! We need your joy to pierce the darkness of a year marked by a pandemic, and much unrest. And so, we proclaim with the psalmist in 16:11: God, "in your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore!"

_____ Comforter of all, come again to turn "our mourning into dancing!" Come again to clothe us with joy!" (Ps. 30:11).

_____ Savior of all when the wise men saw that the star stopped over the Bethlehem manger, they were overwhelmed with joy! (Matt. 2:10).

_____ Overwhelmed with joy!

_____ Pour this joy to us again, O Lord,

_____ Restore to us the joy of our salvation, and sustain in us willing spirits! (Ps. 51:12)

_____ And now Creator of all, lead us out in joy as the mountains and hills before you burst into song and the trees of the field clap their hands! (Is. 55:12).

UNISON: Today we light The Candle of Joy. We touch fire to wick, but only you can enflame us with your joy, which is always our strength. So, come again, Lord Jesus, to bring joy to our hearts and to your world.



Dec. 14 Mon. Much Crying They Make

"Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer. You shall cry for help and he will say, 'Here I am.'"(Isaiah 58:9)

Why are they crying? Millions of words have been written in countless books on child rearing which address the conundrum of crying infants. Experts say there is the "hungry" cry, the "wet" cry, the "irritated" cry, the "too tired" cry, the "bored" cry, the "startled" cry, the "scared" cry, just to name a few. And then there is this "we have no clue why they are crying" cry.

One website listed the most humorous reasons babies and toddlers cry. Here are a few: they cry when they learn mommy has a name other than mommy, they cry because they can't electrocute themselves, they cry because they can't lick the doormat, they cry because the microwave ate their lunch, they cry when their brothers want to sit at the same table to eat,

they cry when you say 'good morning,' they cry when you say 'goodnight,' they cry when you say they have to go, and they cry when you say they have to stay (www.boredpanda.com/funny-reasons-why-kids-cry).

A variety of folks cry in the Biblical text for several reasons. One Sunday at the end of summer, Tom preached a memorable sermon on the importance of weeping before God. In the *Psalms*, especially, speakers don't just ask for help, they "rise up before dawn and cry for help," putting hope in God's words. They cry "from the depths" (Ps. 130:1). They cry to God as their only "hope and refuge" (Ps. 142:5).

Sometimes the impulse to cry out is compared to the woman laboring to bring new life: "For a long time, I have held my peace," complains the speaker in Is. 42:14, "and I have kept still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in labor. I will gasp and pant" (see also Jeremiah 4:31). The next time you are tempted to repress your tears, remember the psalmists rarely practiced this sort of self-restraint. It's hard to overstate how many times the psalmists cry to God. Here is only a sampling. They cry out in: 3:4, 5:2, 9:12, 27:7, 28:2, 34:15, 34:17, 39:12, 57:2, 61:1, 69:3, 86:3, 88:2, 88:13, 102:1, 106:44, 119:146-7, 142:1, 142:6, 142:5, 144:14.

Sometimes, however, they wonder if and when God will hear and answer. "O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer me and by night, but find no rest" (Ps. 22:2). "I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God" (Ps. 69:3). Job wonders if "God [will]hear ...when trouble comes." He finds no comfort in those around him and complains, "I go about in sunless gloom. I stand up in the assembly and cry for help." (Job 30:28). I don't know if you have been as low as Job was, but he sinks so far down that he regrets even the moment of his birth: "Let that night be barren. Let no joyful cry be heard in it." (Job 3:7). He is so low, even cries of joy taunt him in his despair.

Yet there is something stronger than this despair - the confidence that God can be trusted to deliver and to comfort. God's answer at the end of *Job* is startling. Not only is God with Job in all his struggles, God is also with even the most desolate creature no one gives a thought to. God is there to hear the lone cry of the unregarded animal in the wilderness, asking Job the rhetorical question in 38:41: "Who provides the raven its prey, when its young cries out to God, and wanders about for lack of food?"

The formative story of Israel's story begins when the "cries of the Israelites" come to God and God sees how the Egyptians oppress them (*Exodus* 2:23). When we ignore the cries of the oppressed, according to *Proverbs* 21:13, God will not listen to us: "if you close your ears to the cries of the poor, you will cry out and not be heard." If we care for the poor, however, God will care for us: "then shall [we] call and the Lord will answer. [We] will cry for help, and he will say, 'Here I am'" (*Is.* 58:9).

When our children and grandchildren cry out, what do we say? "I'm here. You're ok." Even before we know why they are crying, we come to where they are with words of reassurance. Often when they see us seeing them and when they hear our voice, the cry of woe changes to a cry of hope. This one they trust has come into the dark room. This voice they have learned to count on soothes their whimpers. That is how we are with God. For several reasons, many are crying in dark rooms. When we listen to them, God promises to listen to us. When we go to them, God will come to us, saying, "Here I am."

Prayer: Bearer of all Life, for the babe who is born of Your will, we praise you! For the babe who is born to us and for us, we thank you! Continue, Loving Creator, to hear our borning cries and birth us once more into your Heart. In Your Beloved Son's Name, we pray, Amen.



A Christmas Lullaby

There there,
Lay him down,
There, there,
Not a sound,
Here, Here,
God is found.

There there,
Lay it down
All your sin,
Grace is found.

There there,
Lay you down
In his heart,
Rest is found.

There There,
We are bound
To spread this peace
All around.



Dec. 15 Tues. Squealing to High Heaven

"Shout for joy, O heavens; rejoice, O earth; break into joyful song, O mountains! For the LORD has comforted His people, and He will have compassion on His afflicted ones." (Isaiah 49:13)

"And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'" (Luke 2:13-14).

The other morning my grandson Charlie was squealing joyfully to high heaven. It's often his morning ritual. His face broke out in laughter. It was all reminiscent of my granddaughter Margaret a year or so earlier. She would laugh and squeal in a dark room all by herself. One day she pointed to the window and said, "Angel." I have often wondered if babies are really alone when they "talk" to themselves. Maybe "someone" is there who understands every sound they make.

In learning to talk, babies will babble and often screech, squeal or even shriek. Why? Sometimes just to be alive. Sometimes, they are trying to talk. Child development experts say that children often imitate the sounds our words make, echoing these sounds back in an attempt to communicate with us. As they grow, they will also learn to imitate not only our sounds, but our tones and attitudes, and later the bias behind those words. What a responsibility as we consider what they hear us say. What words are worthy of sharing? What expressions and tones do we want to share with them as they are forming their own words and developing their own voices?

Babies often squeal with exuberance trying to find their words. As I was reading again the story of the night the angels burst into song, I wondered about all this. The angels are raising their voices because the "Word" has come to them. The Word which comes from God is pregnant with purpose, a point made in a scripture from Isaiah 55:11 we sometimes use in the Hanging of the Greens service:

"My word that proceeds from My mouth will not return to Me empty, but it will accomplish what I please, and it will prosper where I send it. You will indeed go out with joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands. Instead of the thornbush, a cypress will grow, and instead of the brier, a myrtle will spring up; they will make a name for the LORD, an everlasting sign, never to be destroyed." (Isaiah 55:11)

In a few weeks, these cypresses and evergreens will fill our homes. The burst of angel song will fill our ears. The Word will come to us again! So, let us join the angels and all creation as they squeal to high heaven and to lowly earth: "Shout for joy, O heavens; rejoice, O earth; break into joyful song, O mountains! For the LORD has comforted His people, and He will have compassion on His afflicted ones"(Is. 49:13).

Prayer: Bearer of all Life, for the babe who is born of Your will, we praise you! For the babe who is born to us and for us, we thank you! Continue, Loving Creator, to hear our borning cries and birth us once more into your Heart. In Your Beloved Son's Name, we pray, Amen.



Dec. 16 Wed. Choosing our Pacifiers

*"And his name shall be called
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." (Isaiah 9:6b)*

When we used to go out with our children, and now with our grandchildren, we might forget a diaper; we might forget wipes. We might forget the whole bag. Some days, we were grateful not to forget the child. But one thing we would go back for - the pacifier.

Ever wonder about the origin of the name? It comes from the word "to soothe, calm or console." A no-brainer, right? We knew there were those who were against them, suggesting it was best for babies to learn to self-soothe. We didn't disagree. We nodded at all that wisdom while we put those pacifiers in our bags!

In September of 1513, the Spanish explorer and conquistador, Vasco Nunez de Balboa, led an expedition of about 190 Spaniards, and also a number of native Americans who had been

taken as slaves, to the southern end of the Isthmus of Panama. Sometime later, atop a mountain peak, Balboa will first see a body of water then known as the Mar del Sur, the South Sea. According to legend, he gives this body of water the name *Pacific*, the Spanish word for *peaceful* because it looked so calm. Looks can be deceiving, for these waters before and since have the potential to be as treacherous as the arrival of conquistadors to this new world. These explorers came looking for gold and glory for their conquering empires and in the process, enslaved and abused the natives, stripped the land of its resources and robbed many of their homes and livelihoods in the name of colonialization.

Such conquests brought great wealth to the coffers of empires eager to have an advantage over others. This wealth, they believed, provided a kind of false security and illusory peace. Empires have often risen and fallen chasing wealth and have used humans as collateral along the way. Slavery began in our country from this selfishness and greed. For centuries, people turned their heads as humans were sold on auction blocks like cattle. Human beings were sold, owned, traded, beaten, intimidated, humiliated, tracked down, and oppressed through a complex arrangement of social, financial, and political systems working together to legitimate the immoral practice of owning people against their will for economic advantage. Still today, the heirs of these advantaged beginnings don't like being reminded that white Europeans and their descendants have always had a leg up over people of color - the indigenous native Americans, the slaves from Africa, and even the poorer *Mestizo* of mixed descent. I am white and am one of those advantaged heirs. I did not always own that. I had created for myself a false peace through a series of illusions that pacified me. I own it now.

Pacifiers come in different sizes. When one is "outgrown," a larger one replaces it. Friends, that trend never ends. We keep on choosing our pacifiers -things to calm the waters, still the

unrest, keep peace sometimes at the expense of justice. To deny injustice is not to eradicate it. Injustice will not go away just because it is not *our injustice*. If it is anyone's injustice, it is ours. As Paul said, if one weeps, we all weep (*Romans 12:15*). We are called to bear one another's burdens, not to despise another for groaning loudly under a load too heavy for anyone to bear.

It is time to throw away some old pacifiers and choose instead to work for the peace and shalom for all people, the peace of having enough, the peace of not being profiled or imprisoned unfairly, the peace which Jesus, who was more brown than he was white, came to bring to every person. I can't presume to say what God is speaking to your heart. I just know the Spirit has spoken clearly to my heart, " Penny, be careful how you choose your pacifiers."

Prayer: Bearer of all Life, for the babe who is born of Your will, we praise you! For the babe who is born to us and for us, we thank you! Continue, Loving Creator, to hear our borning cries and birth us once more into your Heart. In Your Beloved Son's Name, we pray, Amen.



Dec. 17 Thurs. Your Words in My Mouth

"My child, eat honey, for it is good, and the drippings of the honeycomb are sweet to your taste." (Prov. 24:13)

"How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth." (Ps. 119:103)

I wonder if the Psalmist who wrote these words had infants at home. If we want to watch true joy in devouring the word, we only have to give a book, any book, to a teething baby. Forget the pictures. Forget the rhymes. First things first. It goes

straight to the mouth. It's a matter of survival. They must cut those teeth so they will be able to taste, chew, swallow and be nourished by God's good food.

Thanksgiving and Christmas are seasons for savoring our favorite foods - spiced teas, cranberry, pumpkin, special candies, fruit cakes, sweet potatoes, breads specially baked for neighbors. These are opportunities to introduce our youngest to an array of new delights. This process, of course, can be a challenge. With my daughter Laura, I fell into the trap of giving her too much of what she loved early on, all the orange foods. She savored carrots, squash, sweet potatoes, and by her first Halloween, she was so orange, I just plopped a pumpkin hat on her and received several inquiries about how I face-painted her to match her outfit. She had carotenemia. It's a harmless enough condition. But we did begin introducing other things.

I got curious and read up on what infants from other countries eat. According an online article from the *Huffington Post*, Kenyan babies are given sweet potatoes to protect them from a vitamin A deficiency. Even before they have their morning bottle of milk, Jamaican babies are given mashed fruit and honey. Chinese babies at 4 months-old eat rice, fish, carrots, seaweed eggs and "hearty porridges" made of green beans, milk, and banana. Japan celebrates the first eating of solid food as a rite of passage, a feast called Okuizome (First Eating). Each child is given fish, sticky rice, octopus, pickled vegetables, along with a biting stone to help with teething and to encourage the growth of strong teeth. At four days of age, a paste of zamba (grains stirred, fried, ground and mixed with yak butter) is ritualistically placed on a Tibetan infant's forehead "to denote purity"(www.huffpost.com/entry/what-babies-eat-around-the-world).

There are more pictures or videos online than you have time to watch which record the facial expressions of babies weighing in on whether they like something or not. God has some good

things for us we don't ever try because we keep eating only what we like.

What are we savoring? I have watched my grandchildren try to devour their little books, drooling over every page and book cover like their lives depended on it. I want to savor God's words with that passion and intensity, the sweet ones and the bitter ones I have a hard time swallowing. We need all of them.

Prayer: Bearer of all Life, for the babe who is born of Your will, we praise you! For the babe who is born to us and for us, we thank you! Continue, Loving Creator, to hear our borning cries and birth us once more into your Heart. In Your Beloved Son's Name, we pray, Amen.



Dec. 18 Fri. Turning Over

*"Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and men."
(Luke 2:52).*

Ever wonder if Jesus' family marked his growth milestones? We are told that Jesus grew in stature and in wisdom. Maybe Joseph marked his height on pieces of a wood frame or door in his carpenter's shop. Maybe they noticed his "firsts" - the first time he sat up, rolled over, walked, his first words.

Back in August a video popped up in my phone message celebrating my grandson Charlie first turning over. This image brought to mind the day a couple of years before when I had witnessed Margaret first turning over. Turning over is a great rite of passage both developmentally and spiritually. From the earliest moments, *turning* chronicles the story of our lives. When Adam and Eve leave Eden, they will not only turn from paradise into a world transformed by their choices, but eventually the story explains, they will "return" to the earth: "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return

to the ground, for out of it you were taken, you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (*Gen. 3:19*). In *Exodus 3*, when Moses sees the flaming bush, "he turns aside" to see this extraordinary phenomenon and comes upon holy ground inhabited by a holy God. Over and over, the invitation goes out to turn again to God, turn from idols, turn from despair, turn from apathy - to return to the God who will save," Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth; For I am God, and there is no other" (*Is. 45:22*).

When Margaret and Charlie first attempted to turn over, they struggled and made many unsuccessful attempts. It's hard to make that first turn and look up. We need strength in our necks to raise our heads and look up, strength in our core and arms which we have not developed. Before babies make their first turns, we can easily flip them over, but that would not be a true turn. It would not be *their* turn. No one can turn another person. He or she must do the turning. When we are face down, all we see points downward.

A second point to note is that "turning" is not just a random motion; it is a movement away from and towards something. The word *re-pent* (to turn again) carries this sense. To turn, we need to see *the need to turn*. In Peter's Pentecost sermon, he preaches a hard message to the audience gathered. He tells them that each of them bears responsibility for Jesus' death:

*"This man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. ²⁴But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power" "Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, 'Brothers, what should we do?'" (*Acts 2:23-24*)*

Repentance is often preceded by this anguished awareness that there is nowhere left to go, no going back, no clear way forward. Have you been there? Not able to go back. Not able to go

forward. Paralyzed. And then there it is, a way, an answer, a hope beyond your imagination. Peter responds, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him" (Acts 2:38-39).

God enables this turning; God even enables the remorse that leads to repentance. The writer of *Hosea* 6:1 acknowledges the pain of being torn away from our old lives: "Come, let us return to the Lord. For he has torn us, and He will heal us; He has wounded us, but he will bandage us." God empowers us to turn, but leaves the turning to us. Remorse, from *re* (again) *morder*, to bite, is that bite that keeps cutting the heart, that stabbing regret, that "oh if I could just go back and do things differently."

Remorse is not only a turning toward God, it is a turning away from sin. It is also a turning away from the tendency to keep stabbing and wounding the self for the sin. True remorse is the longing to be born somebody else, to stop being who we are, to go back and start over, to become someone completely new. Repentance is the first step we take in faith that we can, by God's grace, become the person we were created to be.

Christmas bears "the promise which is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him" (Acts 2:39). Acts 3:19 gives this variation: "Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord."

This newly born Jesus comes to remind us again this Advent that we can know the "refreshing" that comes "from the presence of the Lord." Are you ready for that refreshing?

Turning back to God is a lifelong commitment. Perceiving that Peter will fall away when he feels threatened, Jesus gives this encouragement in Luke 22:32: "But I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, will strengthen your brothers."

We know something important developmentally is happening when we watch a child turn over for the first time. Imagine how God feels when we do that spiritually. The most precious Christmas gift we could receive from God is the decision to respond to the repeated calls in scripture to turn back to the One who gave us our first birth and offers a second birth:

"Therefore say to them, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, "Return to Me," declares the Lord of hosts, "that I may return to you," says the Lord of hosts. (Zechariah 1:3)

"I will give them a heart to know Me, for I am the Lord; and they will be My people, and I will be their God, for they will return to Me with their whole heart." (Jeremiah 24:7)

*"Let us examine and probe our ways,
And let us return to the Lord." (Lamentations 3:40)*

"I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent." (Rev. 3:19)

As we watch infants make that first turn, we know this is just the beginning. God has given each of us the power to turn. Our young ones will watch our ways. Will they witness our willingness to "turn," repent and start over, or will they see only our stubborn refusal to budge? Will they see us dig in our heels and insist on our "rightness," or bear witness to our decision to humble ourselves and continually seek God's righteousness? What does that "turn" look like in each of our lives?

Prayer: Bearer of all Life, for the babe who is born of Your will, we praise you! For the babe who is born to us and for us, we thank you! Continue, Loving Creator, to hear our borning cries and birth us once more into your Heart. In Your Beloved Son's Name, we pray, Amen.



Dec. 19 Sat. Crawling, Falling and Standing

*Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
I took them up in my arms;
but they did not know that I healed them." (Hosea 11:3)*

In *1000 Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching*, G. Curtis Jones includes a cartoon of a small boy kneeling in prayer with this caption: "Aunt Harriet hasn't gotten married, Uncle Hubert hasn't any work, and Daddy's hair is still falling out... I'm getting tired of praying for this family without getting any results."

We find ourselves on our knees for various reasons. Once an infant turns over, it's only a matter of time before he/she starts crawling. Learning to crawl precedes pulling up and standing. Whenever I see an infant pull up on wobbly knees, I am reminded of the scripture from *Hosea 11:3*: "It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them."

Crawling can also have a negative connotation. One of my students came into class after work with an exasperated look on her face. When I asked what was wrong, she said, "I am just so tired of groveling before my superiors." Groveling in this sense suggests a kind of reluctant and humiliating abasing of the self to "play the game" to get ahead. Another student used the word "crawling" to describe how hard it had been to start up a new business from scratch.

There is a difference between reluctantly groveling before God and bowing to God. At the heart of the first commandment is the warning not to "bow down to" other gods. (*Exodus 23:24*). Moses bowed his head towards the earth and worshipped God in *Exodus 34:8*. Throughout the *Psalms*, people bow down in penitence, sometimes with fasting and tears. When they brought their offerings, they made their presentations on their knees.

In an interesting turn, the Psalmist in 22:29 equates death with bowing down in the earth: "To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him."

In his poem "The Oxen," Thomas Hardy envisions even the "meek mild creatures" kneeling "in their strawy pen" to honor the newborn king ("The Oxen," Thomas Hardy, poetryfoundation.org). According to *John 19:30*, at the end of his life, Jesus will bow his head: "When Jesus had received the wine, he said, 'It is finished.' Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit." He bows as he finishes his life's work. He bows honoring God and giving his spirit back to God. For this unspeakable gift, there will be a time, at the end of time, when all knees shall bow and tongues confess who this Christ is (*Is. 45:23*, *Phil. 2:10-11*, *Romans 14:11*).

This Christmas, we kneel at the manger too, praising God for this child who will bow before the will of God. This is the One who will bring us to our knees and lift us up. This is the one who will steady us when we fall. Those we share life with will see us stumble and fall. The question is, "How will we fall and what or who will we trust to bring us to our feet?"

Prayer: Bearer of all Life, for the babe who is born of Your will, we praise you! For the babe who is born to us and for us, we thank you! Continue, Loving Creator, to hear our borning cries and birth us once more into your Heart. In Your Beloved Son's Name, we pray, Amen.



Dec. 20 The Fourth Sunday of Advent
Lighting the Candle of Love

_____ Christmas brings to the world the gift of the Beloved Son, who calls us to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, and our neighbors as ourselves (Lk. 10:27).

_____ Beloved child, you call us to love our enemies.

_____ And we can do this because your love has been poured into our hearts! (Rom. 5:5).

_____ Poured out to share with God and neighbor! With stranger and adversary!

_____ Poured out to share with ourselves!

UNISON: Beloved Son, today we light the fourth candle of Advent, The Candle of Love. As we touch fire to wick, we ask you to enflame within us the love which will draw us to you and one another.



Dec. 21 Mon. Reaching and Releasing

"When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh." (Matthew 2: 10-11)

I have a new question about the gifts the wise men brought the baby or young child Jesus. Perhaps it's because I have been spending so much time with infants and young children recently.

Soon many youngsters will play with their Christmas gifts. In some traditions, Jesus was a young child by the time the wise men arrived. I wondered if he was excited when he received his gifts. Did he ask how to play with them? Did he invite the wise men to sit down and show him what to do with these somewhat unusual gifts? Did he say thank you? Or, in his excitement, did he grab those chests right out of their hands? I know, I have gone off the exegetical deep end here, but that's the position I read from these days.

Let me explain how I got here. I have been paying more attention than usual to how natural it seems for babies to grab things. Sometime in the early months of life, an infant becomes aware of these two strange appendages at the end of his/her arms. Hands! They go to the mouth, yes, but sooner or later, they go for other things - that cuddly bear, that clicking car, that shiny thing, any shiny thing. Oh, and more, hair, earrings, necklaces, noses, chins, pretty much anything within reach.

It's all a way of exploring the world. What a gift, this opposable thumb! With it we can hold on to people and things. A whole cosmos is within our grasp. We read about the strength of silk from the silkworm, or even the single strands of a spider web, but I wonder if these could compete with a seven-month-old who has spoon in hand and mouth and has decided to keep it there.

Somewhere along the way, we discover we can release whatever we have grabbed, and suddenly, when we learn how to unhand those spoons, those cups, that book, that rattle, the true joy begins! We can toss, throw, and then bend our heads to watch where it all lands. It must give us some degree of satisfaction not only to be able to reach and hold, but also to release.

We humans have the disquieting opportunity to recognize ourselves in a vast array of biblical "graspers." There's Adam and Eve grabbing that fruit. There's Jacob grabbing his twin's

heel in the womb, in the attempt to make it out first! There's the "not to be denied" wife of Potiphar who cannot grasp Joseph's honorable refusal of her seductive moves and so grabs his garment from him as he flees. There's even King David who cannot resist grabbing the wife of one of his most devoted servants.

Our human propensity for grabbing gives the visit of the wise men a whole new meaning. Somewhere along the way, they decided to bring gifts to this newborn king. They had seen his star rising and when we meet them in *Matthew*, they are headed from the East bearing these gifts, and not just token gifts, gifts fit for a king, (gold), a high priest (frankincense) and a prophet/suffering servant (myrrh). Along the way, they meet Herod, who knows all about grabbing and grasping. In fact, of all the characters in the Christmas story, Herod is the consummate grabber: he wants all the power. Even when he pretends to want to "worship" Jesus, we soon learn different. What he really wants is to destroy anyone who threatens his control. Giving, releasing, opening treasure chests, offering, bowing, acknowledging there is someone worthy of our open hands and hearts - are all foreign to him.

The practice of holding and releasing, holding and handing over, of reaching and releasing are at the heart of gifting the Christ child. Holding is no easy thing. Maybe it was a challenge to get a hold of these gifts. Maybe it costs the Magi more than we could imagine. Perhaps there were temptations to diminish the gifts along the way. (*I say this having some experience with "diminishing" gifts. You know, a box is packed for a friend, but as time goes it, it has visitors, so that by the time it is given, it's only a shadow of its former self. The best cake maker sends three pieces of death by chocolate cake to your family but somehow only two make it home.*)

It is no small feat that the treasure chests make it to that young child. They must have contemplated thousands of other uses for that gold, frankincense, and myrrh along the way.

But no, they and their gifts make it to the One most worthy to own them. And when the wise men found him, they fell down and worshipped and then they did what we are all invited to do this Christmas and always - *they released what was in their hands*. They released what they could have kept in their grasp and they were different for that. That is why they are wise, and worship is born from this wisdom.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, in his poem "Moonless Darkness Stands Between" (sometimes referred to as "A Christmas Prayer"), longs to be free to become different in this way:

Moonless darkness stands between.
Past, the Past, no more be seen!
But the Bethlehem-star may lead me
To the sight of Him Who freed me
From the self that I have been.
Make me pure, Lord: Thou art holy;
Make me meek, Lord: Thou wert lowly;
Now beginning, and always:
Now begin, on Christmas day. ([poetseers.org/Poems for Christmas](http://poetseers.org/Poems%20for%20Christmas))

Don't we long for that freedom too? We spend a lifetime learning how to hold and let go of, how to take in hand and hand over. Christmas is the moment of epiphany when we see that all we hold we have because God is a giver, because God holds and unfolds, makes and shares, because God is willing to release not a thing, but a self. God will not even hold on to that which is most precious, the beloved son. Instead, with tender, trembling hands, the Creator opens the treasure deep and says, "Here. Here. This is the firstborn. My firstborn. My son. There is nothing more held back. No one else inside. I'm giving all I have. Here."

And then God gives us Jesus, the baby, the son, the only one worthy to grab the Father's glory, but the one who, Paul writes in *Philippians 2:6*, though he "existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross."

That is why, along with the angels, the wise men, and a multitude of others, we praise him, the One God has "highly exalted." That is why we rejoice this Advent, falling down and confessing this baby is "Jesus Christ the Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

So, what will we reach for and release in 2021? What gifts will we bring the child this year?

Prayer: Bearer of all Life, for the babe who is born of Your will, we praise you! For the babe who is born to us and for us, we thank you! Continue, Loving Creator, to hear our borning cries and birth us once more into your Heart. May the New Year be truly new. In Your Beloved Son's Name, we pray, Amen.



Dec. 22 Tues. A Place of His Own

"And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (Luke 2:7).

It's the biggest wonder-and no wonder at all -that Jesus was born away from home. It's the biggest wonder-and no wonder at all -that all the inns would be filled with paying guests and that Mary and Joseph would be left out in nature. Gary Snyder writes in *The Practice of the Wild*, "Nature is not a place to

visit, it is *home*—and within that home territory there are more familiar and less familiar places.”

The place where Jesus lay, the animal's manger, is perhaps the place Jesus will be most welcomed on earth. He will not be welcomed among the religious establishment. Not by the priests or Levites. Not by the Pharisees. Not by the Romans. In the end, he comes to his own people and even they won't receive him. In *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, Maya Angelou writes, “The ache for home lives in all of us. The safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned.” And yet, Jesus will be questioned wherever he goes during his time on earth. Questioned by those demanding he prove himself to them. Questioned by those who want to trip him up. Questioned by those waiting for him to give the wrong answers. Questioned by those watching for a reason to drive him out of town. Questioned by those whose message is clear, “This is not your home. You are not one of us. You are not welcomed here.”

He is at home on hillsides, on the water, on dirt roads, among the lilies and watching the sparrows, in all those places he brought into being in the beginning when the Word went forth. He spends time praying in desolate places. Maybe that is why Satan takes him to the solitary heights during the temptation, hoping to turn the wilderness which had been a place of respite into a threatening adversary.

Home is the one who holds you and is held by you. American author Stephanie Perkins asks, “Is it possible that home is not a place, but a person? ([goodreads.com/quotes/Stephanie Perkins](https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/Stephanie%20Perkins)). That person, that home, for Jesus is his Father, his original and ultimate dwelling place, and that is the home Jesus longs to share with us.

All Jesus is really looking for is a place of his own. He will never find a physical home here in any traditional sense. He will not

live in a house made by hands. Instead, he spends his life looking for a place *of his own* inside us.

So, it is the greatest wonder -and no wonder at all- that when Joseph and Mary collapse exhausted at the innkeeper's door, there is no room. It's no wonder heaven and nature sing Jesus' praises long before humans are willing to. Yet, Jesus keeps wandering through the centuries looking for hearts ready to take him in. He bears that in common with the many who have been exiled and displaced. They wander too and are familiar with the explanation, "We just can't take you in. There are so many. How can we be expected to? Our rooms, our resources are limited." God knows all about the ones who won't take his son in.

God knows all about the ones who won't take his son in yet keeps looking for the ones who will. God keeps looking for the innkeeper who looks out at Mary and Joseph and says, "I have no room except my own room. No place except the place I lay my head. Take it for the night. Take it because you have more important things to do tonight than I do. You have a Savior to birth. I'll sleep just fine outside."

We are the modern innkeepers who will always face the choice between caring for our business or God's business. We are the modern innkeepers who must choose each day what or who will "fill" our rooms.

God keeps looking for innkeepers who will sacrifice so Jesus can come into the world, innkeepers who will put his comfort over their own, innkeepers who are watching for all the opportunities to prepare room for Jesus in their home and heart.

Prayer: Bearer of all Life, for the babe who is born of Your will, we praise you! For the babe who is born to us and for us, we thank you! Continue, Loving Creator, to hear our borning cries and birth us once more into your Heart. In Your Beloved Son's Name, we pray, Amen.



"Twas the Sunday Past Christmas

'Twas the Sunday past Christmas when on the church lawn,
Many creatures were decked out with clothes from last morn.
The scriptures were placed in the rooms with such care,
With hopes that small children would soon find them there.

At just half past ten there arose such a clatter,
Some rose from their pews to see the great matter.
When what to their wondering eyes should appear
Just down the road not a stone's throw from there-

A couple forlorn with baby stopped near;
Their clunker past thrifty and long years past nifty,
Had sputtered and chortled and shook with a plop
Had smoked and choked and come to a stop.

But one thing as clear as the new fallen snow,
They looked quite alone not sure where to go.
More than one caught them at the edge of their eyes,
But hurried and scurried, and trudged on inside.

Another considered offering a ride,
But thought once again and decided to hide
In a room to the side to make one last call
To line up some business, check sales at the mall.

So, the couple with child made their way to the door
Just after it closed with a click and a clack.
And huddled and hungry, they sank like a sack,
And pressed their ears near the door's tiny crack,

Where inside the warbling voices so slight
Sang carols, cantatas, and hymns of cold nights
Of mangers, of shepherds, of old and new frights,
Of anguish and angels, and sparkling sights,

Of wise men and frankincense
Rich myrrh and gold,
Of heralds and Herods
And old tales that told

A story they knew better
Than all those inside,
Who carried the tune
Like a long-forgotten rune,

And so, they proclaimed as they trudged out of sight,
The next church might help us
Let's go!
They just might!

Just then a young lad not quite five, just past four
Scampered and scurried like a squirrel out the door.
"Come back," he shouted, "Come back, there is more!"
"The dinner is ready; you better come fast!

That 12-layer cake, it's not gonna last!"
So they came back inside to a place of repast,
And feasted on yams, on collards and hams,
On chicken, on beans, on cornbread, on greens,

The likes of those pies, you never have seen,
And then when the eatin' was done, don't you know,
A kindhearted fella gave them a tow,
Shut off the switch, undid the hitch,

And just as he turned to bid them goodbye,
They were nowhere at all, neither low, neither high,
But he heard in his heart as he
Drove out of sight,

"We're out there, you'll see,
In a jam, in a plight.
Keep looking for us
On those cold winter nights."



Dec. 23 Wed. Waters Breaking

*When you go through deep waters,
I will be with you.*

*When you go through rivers of difficulty,
you will not drown. (Is. 43:2a)*

Unless you believe Jesus just appeared miraculously from Mary's womb - and there were some such far-fetched suggestions in the early centuries of the Christian movement - Mary labored to bring Jesus forth. Perhaps her water broke. Likely, she had contractions. It would be the normal course of things. Of course, we don't get those details, although there are several songs and even hymns in our *Chalice Hymnal* which reference Mary nursing her newborn son.

Along the way, life is both threatened and nourished by water. There is always the chance of drowning from too much of it or dying from too little of it. Humans in the Biblical saga experience the horrors of both possibilities. The few humans saved from a massive flood come to know how precious it is to stay safe in the storm, a fact they remembered every time they saw the rainbow. The slave mother Hagar, turned out to the desert heat with her young son, begged God when the last drop of the flask was gone, to spare her the agony of watching her baby die from dehydration. God's people have known what it's like to sit by the water of Babylon, wherever their Babylon happened to be. They remember sitting by foreign waters and weeping as they remembered home -the feel of the water drawn from the cistern in the heat of day and splashed over the face and neck, the spray off the fishing boat as they headed out for a morning catch, a drink from a flask after herding the sheep back down the hill, or the refreshing smell of rain that falls rarely upon dry soils and souls.

Sometimes they passed through waters in ways they never imagined. A band of slaves fleeing Egypt sang and wrote about the way their God heaped up the waters, allowing them to pass through to freedom.

Sometimes they found their heart's desire by water. Abraham's servant Eliezer finds a wife for Isaac at a well (Gen. 24); Jacob finds his wife Rachel at a well, as does Moses in Exodus 2. In the New Testament, an outcast Samaritan woman goes to the well alone at noon one day and finds Jesus and "living water" (John 4).

Sometimes they found peace by stilled waters. How many times have we stood beside graves, grief welling up within, pain almost carrying us under, and been rescued once again by the invitation from Ps. 23 to come again away from the turmoil to renew ourselves beside still waters? How many times have we prayed Jesus would show up for us as the tempests were raging to calm the storm, or keep us safe through it (Mark 4:39-41)?

So today, we remember the moment Mary brought forth her son. Fresh from the womb of God's love, Jesus is born to us. One day at the end of his life, as he hangs on a Cross, Christ will proclaim his thirst, and the water and blood will flow from his side out to the world - to you and to me. It flows out with his love as the ultimate reassurance that:

*When you go through deep waters,
I will be with you.*

*When you go through rivers of difficulty,
you will not drown. (Is. 43:2a)*

Prayer: Bearer of all Life, for the babe who is born of Your will, we praise you! For the babe who is born to us and for us, we thank you! Continue, Loving Creator, to hear our borning cries and birth us once more into your Heart. In Your Beloved Son's Name, we pray, Amen.



Dec. 24 Thurs. Christmas Eve

Look! There He Is! Look!

"When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them." (Luke 2:15-18)

Oh, for the days when we scurried around, fussing to put together the annual Christmas pageant! COVID has changed so much. COVID may alter the way we celebrate the coming of the Christ child, but no pandemic can ever change the fact that Jesus will come to us again. Somewhere angels will sing, shepherds will quake and go see this child for themselves. Wise men will come from afar. Somewhere this child will be born once more and we will gather round that manger, wherever it is. COVID can't stop Christmas!

Oh, for the days of pulling out that half-clothed, dirty, plastic doll with the hair cut off or rubbed off which we have kept in the Christmas storage area and, without a thought, covering it in whatever cloth we can find. After all, most Christmases, who has time even to look at the doll shrouded in some frayed, silky leftover scrapes dropped off by the seamstresses of the congregation? It's usually all we can do to find a Mary to stand near the make-shift manger we've positioned in the center.

But some pageant stories are worth recounting. Like the one about the little girl who brought her baby doll down the aisle and then refused to put it in the manger, or the time the stuffed bear was traded out at the last minute and no one knew it until some furry ears peeped out of the swaddling. Or the time the baby got covered by straw, sending one shepherd in a manic flurry which ended in his overturning the manger, knocking over an angel, and strewing straw all over before he

triumphantly held the baby up and proclaimed, "I got him. He tried to slip out the crack, but I got him!"

The best pageant story ever, though, we heard from a master storyteller, Linda Thigpen. I want her to tell again a story she shared at our DWM/CWF Christmas breakfast a year or two ago. You will never forget it.

Jesus will be born to us again; he is not some inanimate stuffed doll. We are the frayed, beaten up ones, the ones whose lives may look "thrown away," but who Jesus refuses to throw away.

This year we will have a virtual Christmas play about some folks trying to find the Christ child. Where have you found him? On Christmas Eve, I hope you will picture him in the manger taking his first breath, a breath which spiritually will be our first breath too - yours and mine. Picture God's breath entering his lungs, his little chest rising and falling. Picture him moving his head, his arms, and his legs. Picture that. See him squirming in the manger. Feel the Breath of God filling us all again. Feel God's Spirit come to earth and come to us.

Where? There in the manger! There in the world! There in the Word! There in our prayers! There in our service! There in our music and singing! There in the children! There in our families! There at the Table! There in the faces of those we work with! There is the most vulnerable! There in our hearts! There he is! Look!

Prayer: Bearer of all Life, for the babe who is born of Your will, we praise you! For the babe who is born to us and for us, we thank you! Continue, Loving Creator, to hear our borning cries and birth us once more into your Heart. In Your Beloved Son's Name, we pray, Amen.



Dec. 25 Fri. Christmas Day When Loves Comes Down

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." (John 1:1-5)

Today is Christmas Day, and as we light the Christ candle, we celebrate the love that will continue to fire the hope, peace, and joy we long to keep burning into the new year.

In this season, to remain safe, many are choosing to forgo large family gatherings. That may be the case at your home. Even if your gathering is smaller, you will not be alone. Behold! God has made all things new. A baby is born to you. There is a brand-new life under your roof. Hold him. Embrace him. Look into his eyes. He is born by God's will to you and for you.

You light a candle on the center of the table and perhaps have a prayer. This is the Christ Candle. There is another feel in the room. The feel of warmth and fire. Watch the fire glow. This is his day. The day of his birth. The day of your birth too. He has come to be bread for us.

Love came down at Christmas to shake things up, to turn things upside down, to rattle some cages, and to bring love to a world dark with fear and hate. Don't lose that love. Whatever you do this year, don't lose that love. And go find your rattle. Keep that fire God used to light the star over Bethlehem. Find the passion to speak truth to power, the courage to love even when others hate, to encourage when others deride, and to hope when others have given up hope.

That love is real, and the birth of this child has the power to turn us around, bring us to our knees, set us on our feet and send us out for such a time as this. This love has the power to

make us cry, to squeal to high heaven and to fall silent babbling and blubbering before the Word made flesh. Jesus has come so that we might taste and see the Lord is good, and so that we might grasp the height and depth and breadth of God's mercy.

Gather now around the Advent wreathe to light the Christ Candle. You may use the following litany or one of your own:

_____ "Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, love divine;
Love was born at Christmas,
Star and angels gave the sign." (Poem, "Love
Came Down at Christmas," by Christina
Rossetti)

_____ Lord, we thank you for hearing our cries
and sending your own son to save us!

_____ A child born through your will to
glorify you!

_____ A child born to bring us back to you!

_____ A child born in us to transform us into
the image of your Beloved Son!

_____ Saving Lord of all Creation, thank you for
sending us this Love at Christmas.
As we light this candle, may be remember
to share this love each day of the new
year.



Holding the Word

Holy Child,

I pray I won't pack you away in some dark place,
Some forgotten drawer
I never remember to open.

Or bury you
Inside millions of trivial words,
Or under volumes of books.

I pray I won't
Toss you in the recycle bin
Or leave you to blow about in the wind.

I pray I won't leave you
To wither in the weeds,
Or freeze in the cold.

Help me remember
To hold on to you,
To embrace you,

To nurture you,
To swaddle you,
To listen to

Your breathing,
The sound of your voice,
The shape of your words,

The beat of your heart.