

PALMA CEIA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

ADVENT BOOK
2009



Introduction

This Advent we reflect back on Nativity Memories from the past. Some will remember a Nativity set from their childhood and connect the figures with scenes from Christmases past. Others may have reflections from the Nativity scene that connect directly with their own spiritual journey past and present. The manger scene evokes powerful images for many of us and it brings to mind the stories we may share of our own personal angels, our shepherds, and our Wise Men that surround us through the course of our lives.

We all know that angels of caring and mercy exist for us not simply in Scripture, but in everyday life. May the spirit of Christmas that we see manifested in the humble manger scene abide with you and your family throughout the Holiday season and remain with you through all the seasons of your life.
Amen



The art work for the cover was created by Micah Lomel.

First Sunday in Advent

As a child I was always aware, from an early age, of the Nativity, its beauty and special meaning as my mother carefully placed different Manger scenes and figures around our home.

One Christmas, guess I was about six, we had all of our family there, uncles, grandmothers, and we acted out our own unique Nativity scene complete with bathrobes!

As an adult I am so proud that now I can enjoy the Chrismon tree in our beautiful sanctuary every Christmas and urge all Palma Ceia Presbyterian members to do so as well this season

Years ago when a dedicated group of Palma Ceia members carefully crafted the Chrismon ornaments which we still use today, my mother, Edith Williams, made the crèche which hangs on the tree.

This depiction of the Nativity is always hung in a special place, eye level, low on the trees' limbs, especially so that little ones can see it and remember God's miraculous gift to us in the form of a baby born in a Manger.

Please share this Christmas in the decorating of our Chrismon tree and make sure that your children see its ornaments.

JOY TO THE WORLD, THE LORD IS COME!

Charlotte Hunter

How To Arrange A Nativity Set

Each figure in a nativity scene has meaning, and the manner in which they are arranged will contribute to the significance and visual appeal of an outdoor nativity scene. The following guidelines will help you to arrange a meaningful and accurate nativity set.

Nativity sets vary greatly in size and number of pieces, but there are still general rules that can be followed when arranging a nativity scene. Your goal should be to display a nativity scene that is as respectful and accurate as possible. Each figure has meaning, and a proper arrangement will add great depth and significance to a Christmas display.

The Central Figures

A standard nativity set has seven pieces, but nativity scenes can always be enhanced with new figures. Secondary nativity figures are best positioned as onlookers outside the circle of main characters mentioned in the Biblical nativity stories of Matthew and Luke. The central position in any nativity scene should be occupied by the Christ child. He is the reason for the display. Your nativity set should include a stable and manger. Place the manger at the center of the stable. A nativity tradition is to not place the baby Jesus in the manger until Christmas morning, but it is not necessary to follow this practice. The nativity figure closest to Christ should be His mother, the Virgin Mary. A common practice is to place the figure of Mary on one side of the Christ child and His father Joseph on the other. However, some nativity icons actually display Joseph at a distance from the manger, looking away from Christ with an old man representing Satan at his side. The purpose of this is to give place in the nativity scene to the role of doubt in human faith.

Spacing and Secondary Figures

Location will have some bearing on the spacing of nativity figures. An outdoor nativity set will obviously offer more space than an indoor nativity set, but if you are displaying high quality figurines such as Fontanini nativity pieces, you may wish to keep the scene inside.

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How To Arrange A Nativity Set

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Consider the nativity stories in the Bible when positioning secondary nativity figures. Place your nativity figures in concentric circles to emphasize their meaning and increase visibility.

If you have nativity pieces representing shepherds or the three wise men, these can be placed in the first circle. If you have both, placing the shepherds closer than the three Magi would be in keeping with the Biblical accounts, which indicate that the shepherds visited the Christ child before the three kings. In some outdoor nativity sets, a shepherd boy is used as a stand-in for shepherds. The commonest secondary figures besides these are angels and animals. An ideal position for nativity angels is above your outdoor nativity set. If this is impossible, they may be placed within the stable behind the holy family.

The animals commonly used in nativity sets outdoors are sheep, oxen, and camels. The purpose of these figures is to remind you of the humbleness of Christ's birth, or in the case of the camels, the long journey of the Magi. The best way to incorporate nativity animals into an outdoor scene is to place them next to appropriate characters: sheep with the shepherds, camels with the three wisemen.

Nativity Memories

Nativity Memories begin for me when I remember the old Nativity set we had when I was a kid. You could stick a Christmas tree light through the back of it and the whole set was illuminated.

The newer one has some kind of built-in light and is made to represent a humble, rural manger scene complete with goats and dogs and cows and hay. There Christ lies, in this simple manger surrounded by dogs and donkeys and family and Wise Men and Angels. It is in stark contrast to the gold and glitter of the Christmas finery when you see this representation of the King of Kings in this very humble and earthy setting that reminds us of what His coming was all about.

In thinking about the Nativity, I am also reminded of all the people and heavenly beings that surround the tableau. There is a bit of a mystery surrounding the Wise Men. I suppose we'll never know the exact nature of their background but the latest theories have furthered the idea that these Wise Men were perhaps astronomers or scientists of their day. This seems to be a logical conclusion, therefore I picture someone like the astro-physicist Neil DeGrasse Tyson as one of the Wise Men embarking on such a perilous and uncertain journey.

Mr. Tyson reminds me of a wonderful teacher I had in the Ninth Grade named Mr. Taylor. He too was a man that was full of excitement and love for education and learning. Mr. Taylor managed to impart this to the kids in such a way that he was beloved by all who knew him. Therefore I could easily see Mr. Taylor as a Wise Man or perhaps an angel sent to teach and instill in everyone he met a lifelong love of learning.

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Nativity Memories

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My grandfather was another man who would have fit the profile of a Wise Man. He was a businessman who was respected by all who knew him and he was admired as much for his skill in negotiating business deals as he was for his dignity and civility. Those were traits that stayed with him throughout his life. He was a model for a man such as the great fictional character, Atticus Finch from “To Kill A Mockingbird.”

There have been times in my life when I look back and remember myself as a young girl in the same position as that young girl in the story named Scout. As she did with Atticus, I, too would lie across my grandfather’s lap and talk to him as I played with his Atlantic Coast Line tie-clasp. He was truly a Wise Man in my life. In making the connection, it occurred to me that the nature of Wise Men and Angels among us are that we are mostly unaware of the impact of these beings at the time. But later we can see the plan in our lives where we are surrounded in the same way Christ was surrounded by a cadre of Angels and Shepherds and Wise Men.

I have met others throughout my life that I see now as angels of caring and mercy. They were Teachers and Mentors and Friends and Strangers who came into my life and they all made a lasting impression on me. They are all a part of the Nativity scene we form in our minds and our hearts long after we leave childhood. This is the wisdom and the wonder we can rediscover every time we reflect on the humble origins pictured in our Nativity scenes.

Mary Lee Johnson

Just Joseph

My mom has a significantly incomplete nativity set. It's just Joseph. She has a couple of Nativities that she bought or was given over the years. There are of course the children's "craft" ones that were made by one of the children of the family and each is treasured. Each has a certain wrapping or box and each is noted with the date, person, place that secures it in history. But my personal favorite is the "Just Joseph" nativity.

He stands with a collection of other things, a bird's nest, a brass candle holder and candle, a lion's head that may have been a part of a door knocker or a fixture on a wall. It roars silently at Joseph's feet. My mom has always had an eye for the placement of things and this small collection will get adjusted, added to and subtracted from through the year, but Joseph remains sturdily.

I truly do love it. He appears to be terracotta but is probably some rough form of resin. Maybe not. He might be clay like the rest of us. But he's got this great, contented look. About a foot high, his hands rest comfortably on his hips with elbows angled away. His shoulders are relaxed and his head is tilting to one side as he looks down with this warm smile. It's not a grin. It's just a smile and he seems, to me, content. He appears to be enjoying the moment. But his moment never dissipates.

The door opens and closes and the cold blasts of Massachusetts days and nights rush upon him. Newspapers, mail, circulars, trash ads crash down beside him on the small table, sometimes swamping him. He's righted, settled and then continues his watch over an unseen mother and child.

It's great to know he cared. It's great to know that when all the world's troubles became insignificant as his grew to cosmic proportions that Joseph struggled to care well. He put his honor, his pride, his plans for a easily expected future aside in order to care for one whom, at first, he thought did him wrong. When the Bible describes Joseph as "righteous", I think I get a bit of the definition by considering him. This was a righteous man.

I asked my mom why this nativity never grew into fullness. She said she just never got around to collecting all the rest of the pieces and now didn't remember where this first piece came from. So, Joseph remains, content, smiling, assured, relaxed and always... always steady. He is to most a significantly incomplete nativity set, but to me, as I've considered him during my visits to my mom's place, he is whole. And the story is told entirely in him.

Reverend Geoff Kohler

Second Sunday in Advent

Prayer for the Children

Let us save...

Pomegranates, kind words, a baby's cry, the dolphins outjumping a wave, a monk's charnt, painting pictures in clouds, belief in tomorrow, the ozone, church bells in inner-city streets, warm sand on bare feet, rituals, crickets music, family ties.

Let us save them for the children.

Let us save...

raspberry bushes, the full moon of a desert stretch, visions of angels, stars you can grab on a summer night, impossible dreams, snowflakes on the tongue, the family table, faithful friendship, fatigue after a day's work, water table and food chain, laughter, a passion for justice, the present moment.

Let us save them for the children.

Let us save...

the white antelope, a candle flame in a dark chapel, the rain forest, meadows drunk with dandelions, a passion to end hunger, the sound of rain beating on plowed fields, imagination, kneeling to praise, wild fields of sunsets, reverence for life, long grasses covered with dew, a mother's milk, the great-hearted heron.

Let us save them for the children. Amen

Mary Lou Kownacki

(Reprinted 1999: Submitted by Sister Barbara/The Child Abuse Council)

The Prayer of The Red Shoes

One member's short story

“Dear Lord, take care of the little girl with the red shoes, and her mother. Amen” I remember the first day I prayed for them.

“Mom, you were late again. I keep asking you to pick me up early on Thursday. I look silly sitting there all by myself. Miss Anne offered to take me home. I'm so embarrassed.”

“Momma, hurry up. We are going to be late. We've got to get to Florida before Christmas. Santa knows we're going to Florida. He'll look for me there. Get up. We've got to go.”

Momma pushed off the cot she had shared with her daughter. They had a plan. The day the laundry paid, they were leaving. “Hush, Star. Hush” She didn't want to wake the others in the shelter. She cracked her back and neck. The pain made her feel like an old woman.

Being late is a family trait, like long fingers or a widow's peak. No matter how much we try one of us will always be late. Our family crest is a snail.

It was near Christmas, which meant I was really late, and it was hot. Florida is hot. Christmas heat is the worst. Everyone wants to pretend the Christmas card cold. We have the Christmas sweater and plaid pants, and of course the black velvet shoes with the embroidered Christmas ball. It's too hot to wear them but many of us do, because by God, it's Christmas and that's what you do. It was hot. I was late and the light must be stuck because I had sat there for what seemed an hour.

My thoughts wandered away from the eternal red light to home and if my husband and I would make it through the season. We were heavy into the divorce discussions; I really didn't want any more counseling. I just wanted out, maybe out out of everything. I felt helpless.

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Downtown Tampa has a bus station. When the first snap of cold hits the north, you start seeing the influx of the snow starlings. Not the lovely wealthy snowbirds that Florida loves so much, but the poor, homeless, parasitic foul, nest stealing and feeding themselves and their young with garbage on the streets. My office is in between the bus stop and the county building. You see them. Sometimes you dig a dollar out of your pocket or give a ten for them to wash your windows.

“Florida and the Gulf of Mexico” was a bedtime story, one she had told Star since forever. It was warm there, plenty of good jobs, and they would have an apartment with a balcony, just like Juliet and Romeo. Palm trees swayed, warm breezes blew and you could swim in the ocean.

If I had not been late I would not have seen them. The light would not change. I felt I had waited for hours, my nerves frayed. I banged my fists on the steering wheel.

“Come on light. Turn green. I’m late,” I rested my head on the steering wheel and gave up. “I’m always late.”

Star pressed her face to the warm window of the bus. The sunshine hurt her eyes. It was so very bright here and so very warm. “Momma, wake up.” She frowned, “We’re here. We’re at the Gulf of Mexico. And the driver wants us to get out. Let’s go. Please.” She pulled on her mother’s shirt. “Let’s go swimming and lay in the sun like you said. Come on, the bus driver’s getting mad.”

Momma struggled out of her seat. She had fallen asleep with her head turned out toward the aisle. Her body was wrapped around her daughter to cushion and warm her as they drove through the winter night. Her neck would never be the same, but she had to protect her Star. She wasn’t going to fall asleep and let someone touch her baby or worse yet steal her.

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“Hang on. Let me get all stretched out.” Pain rippled down her back as she moved her head. “Shoot, this was one real stupid mistake.” She looked down at Star’s believing bright eyes; her face creased with sleep lines and she knew she had to have something better for her baby.

Turning my head to catch the cool air condition, I saw them. The skinny bow-legged mom with badly bleached blonde hair carrying one bright red patent shoe she was hitting on her thigh. Up ahead ran a child. I thought at first she was a toddler, she was so very small, but realized at the coordination of the fleeing child that she must have been at least four or five. The windows were up, the air on, and Christmas music made its way out of the radio. I watched them in the cool of the car.

“Don’t get ahead of me. You don’t know where you are going.” She didn’t know where she was going either. It was scary being here. Had she lost her mind? Had she begun to believe the bedtime stories she told?

They came from the bus station. They looked, even from across the street, hungry. The one small plastic looking suitcase the woman carried spoke of a destitute situation.

My heart went to them but what could I do? I was in a real destitute situation myself, pending divorce. I had teenagers that hated me. I found every time I tried to help someone they thought I was crazy; people didn’t want the help of a middle-aged, unhappy woman.

Where was she going to get a job? Who would hire a skinny dumb girl with a baby? Had she lost her mind?

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I remembered a sermon. It seemed hokey. An old woman, discouraged by her blindness and crippled body felt she could no longer work in the church. Her dream was to work with the youth. The minister gave her the greatest job, prayer. A prayer, his sermon said, could be said by anyone, at any time, and could change the world.

“Star, slow down. I’m too tired to catch up. Stop.” She was hot and scared. “Come hold my hand so I won’t be alone.”

I put my forehead against the steering wheel and prayed not for guidance, grace, or forgiveness; my usual prayer. This prayer I had never said before. It was for someone else, someone I did not know, and someone not on the list at the church. I would never know if this prayer was heard, never know if it was answered. I prayed for the mother and girl with the little red shoes.

“Dear Lord, take care of the little girl with the red shoes, and her mother. Amen.”

Prayers can be quiet, they can be shouted, sung, murmured, painted or danced. Prayers can be in the planting of a seed or the harvest of a field. They come with the morning sun and set slowly with the moon in the late nights of worry. Prayers are said in tears of anger, fear and joy. They rise out of the fullness of a community or in the lone moments of oneness. Prayers are the greatest leap in faith.

“She felt that if just one person cared; if someone would look at her with anything but disgust. Just one look of kindness then she wouldn’t be so frightened. She could make it.

“Star. Slow down now.”

“Momma, where’s it? Where’s the Gulf of Mexico? I don’t see it.”

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It's been ten years and I would love to tell you all about the little girl with the red shoes, but I don't know. I do know that I pray for her. Sometimes I forget, months at a time and then something will spark my memory and I will bow my head.

“God, it's me again, take care of the little girl with the red shoes and her mom.”

As for me, He must have noticed that I could use some help too. Our family is still late, but the kids are educated and happy. They actually think that I was a pretty good mom. My husband and I have learned to share our problems and prayer makes every thing easier to handle.

“Dear Lord, this is Star again. Thank you for this day. Thank you for the life you have given me, for my mother and her bravery and for bringing us to the Gulf of Mexico. Merry Christmas.”

The Friendly Beasts

Jesus our brother kind and good
Was humbly born in a stable of wood
And the friendly beasts around him stood
Jesus our brother kind and good

"I" said the donkey shaggy and brown
I carried his mother up hill and down
I carried him safely to Bethlehem town
"I" said the donkey shaggy and brown

And "I" said the cow all white and red
I gave him my manger for a bed
I gave him my hay for to pillow his head
"I" said the cow all white and red

"I" said the sheep with a curly horn
I have him my wool for his blanket warm
And he wore my coat on that Christmas morn
"I" said the sheep with a curly horn

"I" said the dove from the rafters high
Cooed him to sleep that he should not cry
We cooed him to sleep my love and I
"I" said the dove from the rafters high

And "I" said the camel all yellow and black
Over the desert upon my back
I brought him a gift in the wise men's pack
"I" said the camel all yellow and black

Thus every beast remembering it well
In the stable dark was so proud to tell
Of the gifts that they gave Emmanuel
The gifts that they gave Emmanuel

Submitted by Charlotte Hunter

Another Donkey

“We had nothing left to trade,” Joseph said, looking wistfully at the donkey. He shouldered his pack, picked up the posts of the litter that he dragged the rest of their things with. “We need the rest of these things for our life in Bethlehem.”

“It does not matter,” Mary agreed. “I walked before. I can walk now.”

“Maybe we should wait,” Joseph started to say.

“You know that woman with the blue sash I was speaking with this morning,” Mary interrupted, “She and that whole group she was with were on their way to Bethlehem as well. We better get moving. It’s only another day.”

“I’m just thinking the child is coming soon.”

“Better there than here,” said Mary not enjoying the idea of being so close to Herod’s home. But then she thought, there’s no place out of Herod’s reach. Then Joseph saw her smile as she thought on that the king’s arm wasn’t as long as God’s.

They left the donkey they had examined. It was a fine animal, sturdy, healthy and the trader called after them as they moved on that they wouldn’t find another as good. They were sure of that.

Down through the valley, past caravans setting up on the outskirts of the city, out toward the low, rolling hills they walked. Joseph had one eye on the path and one on his young wife who seemed to be walking better than him as he dragged the litter.

As they came over a rise there was a heavy man, big, brawny who seemed to be beating a sack of wheat with a stick. Then they realized it wasn’t a lifeless bag it was an animal, a donkey almost white with age. It was on its knees with its head curled away from the whipping.

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Joseph leaped down the slope to the man and grabbed his arm. “Leave me alone! This creature has seen its last day,” the man screamed. He shifted but he could not pull free of Joseph’s grip. Finally he stopped trying and stepped away. “You want this miserable animal’s life? Fine! It’s yours.” He scrambled up the roadway, giving Mary a clouded scowl and went on toward Jerusalem.

The animal was in terrible shape, but it scrambled to its feet once it saw that the attack was over. It drank their water as if it had just discovered the ability, but after a little they left it on its own. The donkey watched them go for a little but then it trotted after them. For half the way to Bethlehem it followed and finally with a sense of desperation and a prayer, Joseph placed Mary on its back.

He was shocked as he watched the old, white animal straighten under the burden of the young woman. He was even more surprised when it walked so steadily. He dragged the litter watching for any tremor or wobble but it kept moving. Joseph just had no way of knowing the delight of the animal that, for the first time in its life, was moving without being struck.

Geoff Kohler 2008

Luke 2, 4, 5

Legend of the Poinsettia

Have you ever heard “The Legend of the Poinsettia” (author unknown)?

The story goes that at the door of an adobe hut in Mexico stood a little girl, weeping as though her heart would break. She was a very poor little girl and her name was Aleta. She was weeping because Christmas was at hand and she had nothing with which to show her love for the Christ Child. She knew that all the people would come to the nearby church on Christmas Eve, bringing flowers to place around the crib which had been built upon the altar.

As she stood with the tears blinding her eyes, an angel appeared by her side and said, “Why are you crying, little girl?” Surprised, Aleta said, “Because I have nothing to take to the Christ Child on Christmas Eve to show how much I love Him.” The angel told her, “Gather an armful of those weeds by the roadside and when you come to the altar, place them by the crib.” “Oh!” exclaimed Aleta, “I do not wish to place weeds among the lovely flowers that will be at the altar!” “Do as I say, said the angel, and the Christ Child will know that you love Him.” Aleta smiled and promised to do as the angel had said.

The church was ablaze with lights on Christmas Eve. Aleta came with an armful of weeds, all she could carry, and gently made her way through the throng that filled the church. Then she placed the weeds among the flowers and bowed her head in silent adoration.

A gasp of delight came from every part of the great church and Aleta raised her eyes. To her astonishment, the weeds she had placed at the altar had become a bower of the most beautiful scarlet flowers. Ever since, these flowers have been known as the poinsettia, the Christmas flower.

Dear Lord: As the cherry red poinsettia has its special way of saying Merry Christmas, may we also add...“Joy to the world! The Lord has come!” - Amen.

Diane King (Reprint 1999)

Nativity Set

I did not mean to start collecting Nativity sets, but they seemed to find me. Many were gifts, one was purchased with saved monies, one was made by the children around the kitchen table, one is plastic for little hands to grab and play, some are miniature, several are ethnic, all are loved. But one came totally as a surprise one afternoon only about a week before Christmas. I remember standing in the kitchen late one afternoon with my husband going over the many “to-do” lists and trying to figure out how we were going to get all the beds set up for children and grandchildren, what needed to be picked up at the grocery, when did the next party start, did we have the presents wrapped, how many items were still left on the shopping list, and what about dinner?

In the midst of the debate and debacle the door bell rang and the brown suited UPS elf scurried across the dining room window. We brought in several brown boxes all tightly taped and addressed to me. The mystery was that it came from a man that I barely knew, someone I had met at an educator’s convention at least a decade ago, and our only contact had been through an on-line newsletter regarding teaching curriculums. I almost panicked because I could not remember what I could have possibly purchased that would come to my house this last in the Advent season.

Inside, tenderly wrapped in layers upon layers of bubble wrap was a stained glass Nativity set with all the principal characters and a camel, a cow, a sheep and a chicken thrown in for good measure. Included was a letter that carefully described how he and his late wife had made these sets over the years and he had decided that in her memory he would make sets and mail to friends across the country. My husband and I unwrapped each piece with care, gazed in awe at the colors, and stood dazed and amazed at the generosity of the gift. I scurried around to clean an appropriate table top and, when each piece was in place, all we could do was to stop and to stare with full and grateful hearts.

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I keep that Nativity set in my office on the hutch just above my computer. I want not only to share its beauty with those who visit, but to have it as a reminder that God breaks into the hustle and bustle of our daily lists and lives with the unexpected message of love that we can unwrap with awe and share with abundance. Thanks be to God for the wonderful gift of His Son Jesus Christ.

Linda Beckham



Joy to the World

My favorite Christmas hymn has long been “Joy to the World.” In past years, this was always the final hymn at the Christmas Eve Candlelight Service. The lights would go back on and the organ would swell with the sound of “Joy to the World,” which we would all sing enthusiastically. To me it was, and still is, the essence of the holiday—the joy that the Christ child brought to the world on that long ago Christmas Day. It is a hymn that you can sing at the top of your lungs, no soft and gentle lullaby but a joyous, happy announcement that the Lord has come into our world-

Anne Loomis (Reprinted from 2006)

Joy to the World! The Lord is come; Let earth receive Her King,
Let ev'ry heart prepare Him room, and heav'n and nature sing, and
heav'n and nature sing, and heav'n, and heav'n and nature sing.

Joy to the world! The Savior reigns; Let me their songs employ.
While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains repeat the sounding joy, repeat
the sounding joy, repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

He rules the world with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove the
glories of His righteousness and wonders of His love, and wonders of His
love, and wonders, wonders of His love.

Treasure

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.” -Matthew 13:44

Christmas and treasure go hand in hand for me. The image of the wise men from the East is ingrained in my mind’s eye. Matthew said, “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 2:11.

Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount teaches, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven...For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Matthew 6:19-21.

Advent is a wonderful time to reflect on the “treasure” we find there in the Bethlehem manger. The joy and richness of the Christmas season is no accident. God has gifted us with a treasure that is of unspeakable value.

Lord God, we praise you for the treasure we find in Jesus Christ. We thank you that our treasure chest is a manger. In this time of Advent waiting, prepare our hearts to receive His coming. May our hearts find treasure only in Him!

Amen.

Bill Wallof (Reprint from 2000)

The Nativity Set

I have inherited our nativity set from my parents, which makes it invaluable to me, even though monetarily it probably isn't worth very much. I have wonderful memories of Mom setting up the little tabletop display each Advent. Seeing that nativity, we knew the excitement of Christmas was beginning. I liked to play with the sheep and move the camel around. My boys did the same as they grew up. Jonathan liked to crowd the pieces together so that they could all be closer to baby Jesus.

Over the years the pieces have become chipped and worn, but that only means they're more loved. Our humble nativity sits on the entryway table, so that each day as we come and go, the reminder is there that long ago a baby was born - a baby that would change our lives and fill our hearts with love and joy and teach us to love others as we love ourselves.

Peace and blessings on you and your family, and may you all move closer to baby Jesus during this blessed time of Christmas.

Nancy Creedon



Fourth Sunday in Advent

Have you ever thought about turning the preparation of your home for Christmas into a liturgical moment for your family? In the midst of the excitement, laughter, and good cheer of Christmas take a moment to be intentional about why as a Christian it is important to decorate the tree and carefully unwrap each piece of the nativity. In many households decorating the house is a family ritual. In some houses it includes listening to favorite carols and perhaps sharing a cup of hot chocolate or a freshly iced cookie so that all may step back and take in the benefits of the sometimes difficult work of crawling into the attic to find the last box of Christmas ornaments or grandma's nativity or the package of lights you know you bought on sale after Christmas last year. This year, in addition to the carols, cookies, and hot chocolate remember that God is a part of this special time too and give thanks.

A Nativity Blessing -

God of silent nights and not so silent nights, as we gather as a family to prepare our home for Christmas we ask that you prepare our hearts to once again receive the good news of the birth of Jesus. As we unwrap this nativity and make a special place for it in our home we ask that you will use each piece to remind us and all who enter our home this Christmas season of the ancient and sacred story of the birth of Christ. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

Reverend Nicole Partin

Keeping Christmas

It is a good thing to observe Christmas day. The mere marking of times and seasons when men agree to stop work and make merry together is a wise and wholesome custom. It helps one to feel the supremacy of the common life over the individual life. It reminds a man to set his own little watch, now and then, by the great clock of humanity.

But there is a better thing than the observance of Christmas day, and that is keeping Christmas.

Are you willing to forget what you have done for other people and to remember what other people have done for you; to ignore what the world owes you and to think what you owe the world; to own that probably the only good reason for your existence is not what you are going to get out of life, but what you are going to give to life; are you willing to do these things even for a day? Then you can keep Christmas

Are you willing to stoop down and consider the needs and the desires of little children; to bear in mind the things that other people have to bear on their hearts; to try to understand what those who live in the same house with you really want, without waiting for them to tell you; to trim your lamp so that it will give more light and less smoke, to make a grave for your ugly thoughts and a garden for your kindly feelings, with the gate open-are you willing to do these things even for a day? Then you can keep Christmas.

Are you willing to believe that love is the strongest thing in the world, stronger than hate, stronger than evil, stronger than death, -and that the blessed life which began in Bethlehem nineteen hundred years ago is the image and brightness of the Eternal Love? Then you can keep Christmas.

And if you keep it for a day, why not always? But you can never keep it alone

By Henry van Dyke

Submitted by Susan Barksdale

Christmas Eve

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of deep darkness, on them has light shined.” (Isaiah 9:2)

One of the great joys of Advent and Christmas is in the comfort of the familiar. We see old ornaments that used to hang on our parent’s tree, we smell the familiar spice of someone’s classic pumpkin pie recipe, we hear the third stanza of particularly recalled carols, and their nearly forgotten, yet familiar, lyrics come back to us like the sound of an old friend’s chuckle. The ability of the season to evoke glad and tender memories is comforting. It restores our hope that life can be happy and can contain joy.

I think the comfort of the familiarity is one of God’s gifts to us in this season, a sign that God loves us and longs for our joy and happiness. And why not? Why shouldn’t God want to give us some comforting gift at Christmas? Some testimony to the reality of His love supremely revealed in Jesus. Isn’t that what gifts are at their best, symbols of the old, familiar loves in our lives?

And yet, Christmas also brings us face to face with profound mystery. When we gaze into the manger we see the power of God to do a new thing, to effect changes in a way we couldn’t possibly predict, through a future beyond our wildest imaginings.

Those two themes of the comfort of the familiar and the deep mystery of the Incarnation are reflected in our worship during the Advent season. And you will find that amongst all of the horns, singing trees and clanging bells that make so much noise in this season, the church has the honest good news! It’s ours to proclaim, to see with the shepherds, to sing with the angels, to ponder with Mary. Come and worship and you will hear the familiar story, “God loves you, and desires your salvation, and has provided the means through Jesus Christ, born a baby in Bethlehem.” And mystery of mysteries, God has done this “while we were yet sinners!”

Sometimes people will say to me, “I have a hard time coming to church now because I don’t feel like Christmas; my burden makes me too sad.” But haven’t you heard? It was precisely for the sad that God gave us Christmas. It was for the weary and the hopeless that God came into the world.

Reverend John DeBevoise

Every Good and Perfect Gift

(Sermon originally preached by The Reverend John DeBevoise December 13, 1987)

Scripture

Isaiah 40: 9-11

I Thessalonians 5:16-24

James 1:17-18

Dear Dad,

I hope this letter finds you and Mom well and happy. You must be in the midst of Christmas preparations there at home and in the Church, just as we are here. It's busy, isn't it? But the Church is a good place to be at Christmas time. This holiday so particularly belongs to us that while hectic, it's great to be here in the midst of it. I try not to let my preparation and structuring and coordinating overwhelm the nativity, but it's hard. It's hard to receive the miracle when I'm so busy working at the celebration.

I remember the Family Christmas Eve service last year. That's the early one to which we especially welcome people with children. ...I was going to do the children's sermon at that service and at that service the children's sermon is the sermon. There is no other sermon and the service builds to the children's sermon like it usually builds to the sermon.

I wanted to have a great children's sermon that night...I had built a children's sermon around a little manger scene. I was bringing in the little manger and then one by one was going to unwrap the characters and with the children place them into the nativity, gently, unfolding and discussing the role of each one, ending finally upon the gift of the baby Jesus. And lastly we were going to sing together "Away in a Manger." It was a scene calculated to warm the heart of Ebenezer Scrooge, to bring tears to the Grinch's eyes.

...We had a large crowd there for that service. Larger than we had ever had at that service before. The sanctuary was beautiful. We got through the first hymn and then Chuck wisely stood up, approached the lectern and said

something like this: “We are glad you are all here. It is Christmas Eve and we are glad your children are here. So don’t feel embarrassed if they make a little more noise or movement than usual. This service is especially for them.” An important and nice gesture.

But neither he nor I was prepared for what followed. It was as if he had taken his finger out of a human dike. Children began to go crawling underneath pews. Babies were being passed over heads from parents to nearby Aunts and Uncles. Little voices were breaking out in carols on their own, and somewhere little bells were ringing...And Chuck and I were valiantly working to move through that order of worship with some semblance of order.

...When we got to the children’s sermon I knew it was going to have to be a little different than I had envisioned. But I had faith in the story. I sat on the steps and called the children forward. And they came, and they came, and they came. I don’t remember them ever stopping. At some point I had to start...

I’m not sure that some of them ever realized I was there. They were too busy celebrating Christmas Eve with each other. There were children under the Communion Table, under the piano, children were moving up into the choir loft, children were hiding behind the pulpit.

I pulled out my wooden stable and wrapped figures and almost immediately they were gone – not being unwrapped one at a time but all at once, the manger landing somewhere behind me. “Let’s put them in the stable,” I vainly shouted, and so they did. Again and again and again. Wise men came and went and came and went from that manger, each child taking a turn. Shepherds were on the roof. One donkey figure was trying to enter through the little hole in the back where a Christmas light can go. Children were fighting over an angel. Someone was trying to keep Mary. And I realized as they reached a fever pitch, “I have lost control. These children could carry me out that door.”

“Let’s sing a hymn in conclusion” I shouted – and so we did. ... “They were right to be full of delight, these little children,” I thought to myself as people filed out the door. They are right to be so incredibly excited. But what did these people think of this service that seemed chaotic? And as they left the sanctuary one elderly woman, a little hard of hearing, stopped and pressed

my hand. “Perfect,” she said to me, “Just perfect.” And now I think she was right.[1] Not in the way I wanted the children’s sermon to be perfect, not in the way we try and make things perfect. But in the way God makes things perfect. In the way that God takes all of our fumbling and half-hearted attempts at love and through His graciousness can redeem them and make good and perfect gifts out of them.

And that’s the truth about Christmas, isn’t it, Dad; that this is not our doing at all, but God’s doing, this is not an event we have to make happen but a gift of God to us, “a perfect gift coming from above, coming down from the Father of lights.” This is a gift, this is nor our doing at all.

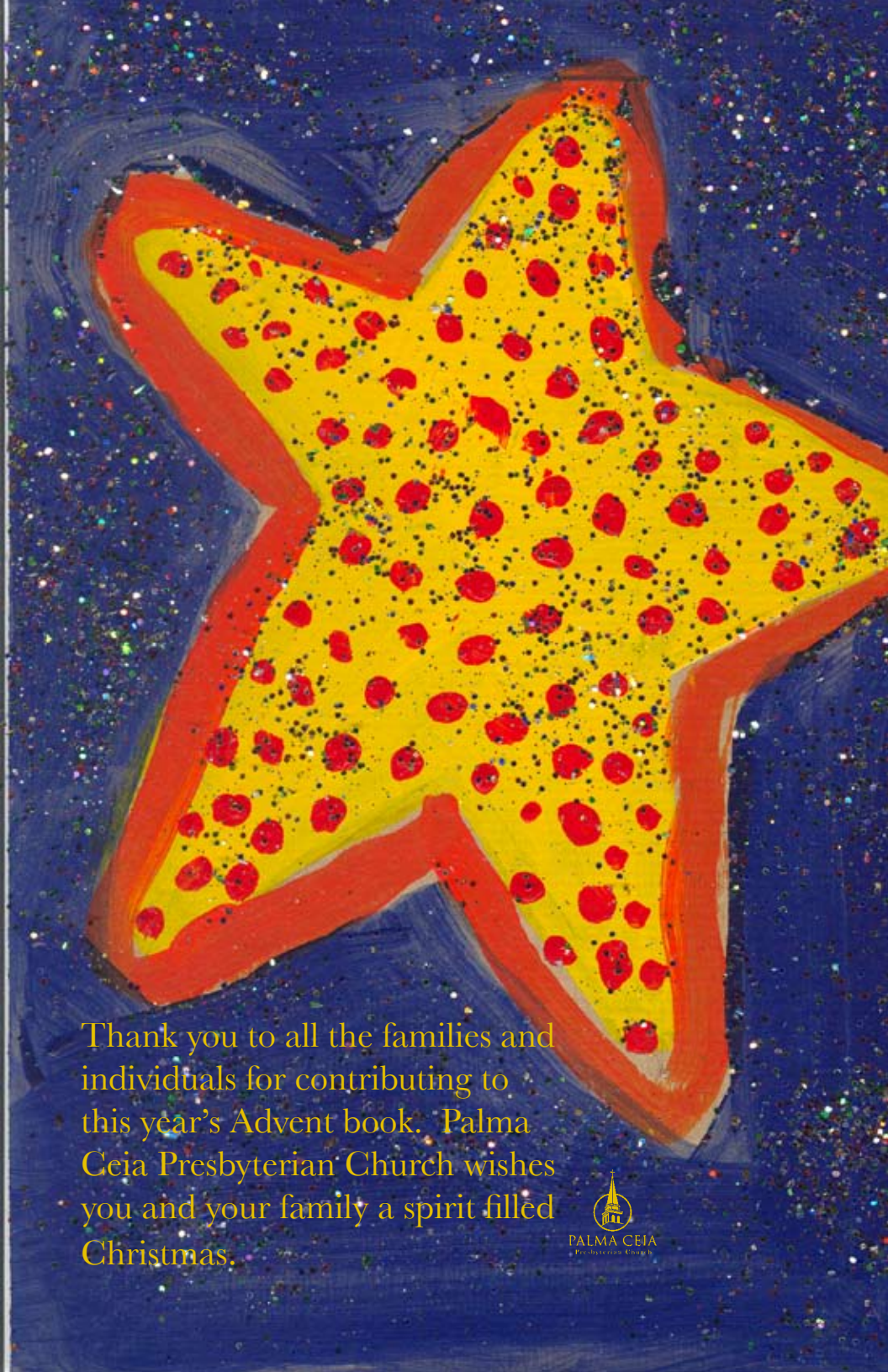
Oh, I know there is lots to be done. I’m not suggesting we abandon our festivities, or wrapping, or sermon writing or special cooking. But I’m working at realizing this is God’s gift, this is God’s action, and so I’m trying to give God room to work on me, trying to receive what God has done, what God is doing.

“Do not quench the Spirit for the God of Peace himself is sanctifying us, working in us, so that our spirit and soul and body will be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. For the God who calls us is faithful. God will do it.” This is God’s doing. God’s perfect gift.

Wishing for you the gift of a joyous Christmas.
Amen.

John DeBevoise

[1] The “perfect” reference line was drawn from a 1987 short story by The Rev. M.L.Lindvall.



Thank you to all the families and individuals for contributing to this year's Advent book. Palma Ceia Presbyterian Church wishes you and your family a spirit filled Christmas.

