

# The Gift of Advent



"Light in the Darkness"

Rebecca Constantine, acrylic

## What is Advent?

Advent is a four-week season in the church's year that leads up to Christmas Day. It is a time of expectant waiting and reflective preparation. Waiting on the birth of the Child of God and simultaneously preparing ourselves for His return.

Advent is a very old practice in the life of the church. No one

knows the date of the first observance of Advent, but we do know that it comes all the way from Medieval times.

The Medieval church gave us many wonderful gifts: stained glass windows, depicting Biblical scenes for those who could not read. It gave us beautiful paintings and sculpted reliefs, helping us to visualize the Scriptures. It gave us Mystery, Miracle, and Morality plays – dramas that enacted Biblical stories and moral teaching. The Medieval church gave us illuminated texts, beautiful renderings of the Bible, which was hand printed at the time. And it gave us seasons of the church year, like Advent.

In this collection of devotional thoughts, we celebrate the stories and thoughts of the people at Triune Mercy Center. We celebrate art and the gift of getting to know each other as we contemplate the grand story in which we find ourselves.

Each day has a reading and a work of art. We invite you to spend a few minutes reading and thinking each day as we wait together.

Peace to you. And joy, and hope, and love.

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For information about Triune Mercy Center, supporting Triune, and volunteering at Triune, visit the church website at: <http://trunemercy.org>

Original art from this project is available for sale. The proceeds support both the artists and Triune Mercy Center. For information on specific pieces, contact Owen Robertson at:

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## The Day Prior to Advent: The Gift of Santa, Sonndheim, and John the Baptist

*John 1: 26-27 NIV "I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."*

In the mind of a child, he is the grand master of Christmas. My magical thinking dreamed of Christmas Trees stacked so high with presents, you could barely see the star on top of the tree. Christmas Eve was an agony of delayed gratification. If only tomorrow would come. If only I could get to sleep. If only my parents didn't stay up so late. If only....

I lay in my bed singing prophetically and confessionally,

O, you better watch out.

You better not cry.

Better not pout.

I'm telling you why.

Santa Claus is comin' to town.

Until I was thirteen. Then he got sidelined.

Santa regained the grand master position when my son was born. He remained there, duking it out with Jesus, until my ten-year-old figured it out.

Santa's a nice idea, but if this is who we've been waiting for, looking for, longing for, dreaming about, then we've set our sights way too low. We haven't looked deep enough. We have dreamed big enough. We are still waiting at the surface of our longing.

Hear the words of John the Baptist in John 1:29-30:

*"Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'"*

Someone's coming. Someone grand. Someone's coming after me who's greater than me because he was there before I even got here. Someone greater than Santa.

Perhaps today we can borrow the words of Stephen Sonndheim and Leonard Berstein –

Could be, who knows?

There's somethin' due any day

I will know right away, soon as it shows

It may come cannonballin' down through the sky

Gleam in its eye, bright as a rose

Who knows? It's only just out of reach

Down the block, on a beach, under a tree

I got a feelin' there's a miracle due

Gonna come true, comin' to me

Could it be? Yes, it could

Somethin's comin', somethin' good, if I can wait

Somethin's comin', I don't know what it is

But it is gonna be great

With a click, with a shock

Phone'll jingle, door'll knock, open the latch

Somethin's comin', don't know when

But it's soon, catch the moon, one-handed catch

Around the corner

Or whistlin' down the river

Come on, deliver to me

Will it be? Yes, it will

Maybe just by holdin' still, it'll be there

Come on, somethin', come on in, don't be shy

Meet a guy, pull up a chair, the air is hummin'

And somethin' great is comin'

Who knows? It's only just out of reach

Down the block, on a beach, maybe tonight

Maybe tonight, maybe tonight

Someone greater than Santa Claus is comin' to town. Someone we've been longing for even if we don't know how to put words to the longing. It's time. He's almost here.

Songwriters: Stephen Sondheim / Leonard Bernstein / Stephane Audard / Ludovic Jaen Pierre Giquet De Preissac

*Something's Coming* lyrics © Warner Chappell Music Ltd., G Schirmer Inc, Jalni Publications Inc., The Leonard Bernstein Music Publishing Co. LI



"Santa"

Alex Williams, multi-media

# The First Day of Advent: The Gift of Waiting

Nikki Day

December 1, 2024

Luke 2:6-7 NIV

*While they were there (in Bethlehem), the time came for the baby to be born, and she (Mary) gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.*

I've given birth to five children, so I know something about waiting.

Waiting for a baby is full of excitement and sweater-knitting and making ready.

I was driven mad, though, by people asking, as my girth expanded, "When is that baby coming?" "Weren't you due two weeks ago? That baby is going to be huge." "Aren't you ready for that baby to be born?" "Aren't you ready to be delivered?!"

By child #3, I knew better than to announce a specific birth date so I could just say, "We're still waiting. Getting ourselves ready."

One of my granddaughters, Emma, newlywed and eager to begin a family, gave her dad a present at a family gathering in June. It was a "onesie" that read, "You can stop asking now." We were all happy to hear the big news, "Emma is due at Christmas!"

We know when we'll celebrate the birth of the baby Jesus.

Stories of shepherds, angels, magi, and mangers remind us year after year that GOD has come among us. Made his home with us. It's almost like Jesus is born year after year.

Many of us have read and heard, "There is no room at the inn." So the question is, "Are we ready for that baby to be born?"

"Are you ready to be delivered?!"

For us, there is no "when?" It's December 25.

There is no "where?" It's inside of us.

Advent is a good time to make space for GOD Incarnate to fill our hearts. It's a time to listen for GOD's sometimes annoying questions. Friends, we have time to listen, to sing, to anticipate, to prepare ourselves.

We know that the Christ comes year after year, at the same time. He is an unhoused immigrant looking for home. It's up to us to open our hearts and make ready by making room in our cluttered lives.



"A Present"

Chloe Constantine, acrylic

## The Second Day of Advent: Gift of Being Named

Elaine Nocks

December 2, 2024

Luke 1: 13-14 NIV

*But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John."*

Luke 1: 30-31 NIV

*The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus."*

Not all expectant parents are provided the wisdom of angels in choosing a name for their baby, but being named is a gift wrapped in meaning and the projection of a future identity. A name creates the container for a life! Something to live into. Something to live up to. That alone is worth pondering!

*John* grew into his name as the prophetic baptizer who prepared the way for *Jesus* whose name came to have a power and presence like none other—to this day.

Jesus! Jesus! There is *indeed* something about that name.

You may have heard, or said, the name of Jesus in anger as a curse or in prayer as a plea. But do we really know the one whose name we shout or whisper?

This Advent season, consider taking some time to "sit" with the name of Jesus. Prepare for that meditation by reading through at least one of the Gospels. Then just be quietly and attentively present to the name of Jesus. That name—the container of all that is good-- could change your life.

*There is something about that name!*



"Light"

Russell Dodd, airbrush

# The Third Day of Advent: The Gift of Forgiveness

Marydell Gordon  
December 3, 2024

John 3:16-17 NIV

*For God so loved the world that he gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*

Forgiveness is a gift birthed out of pain. When extended, forgiveness breaks the bondage of anger, hate, bitterness, and resentment. Forgiveness is truly a gift to the person who has been offended. It is releasing self from the chains of unforgiveness.

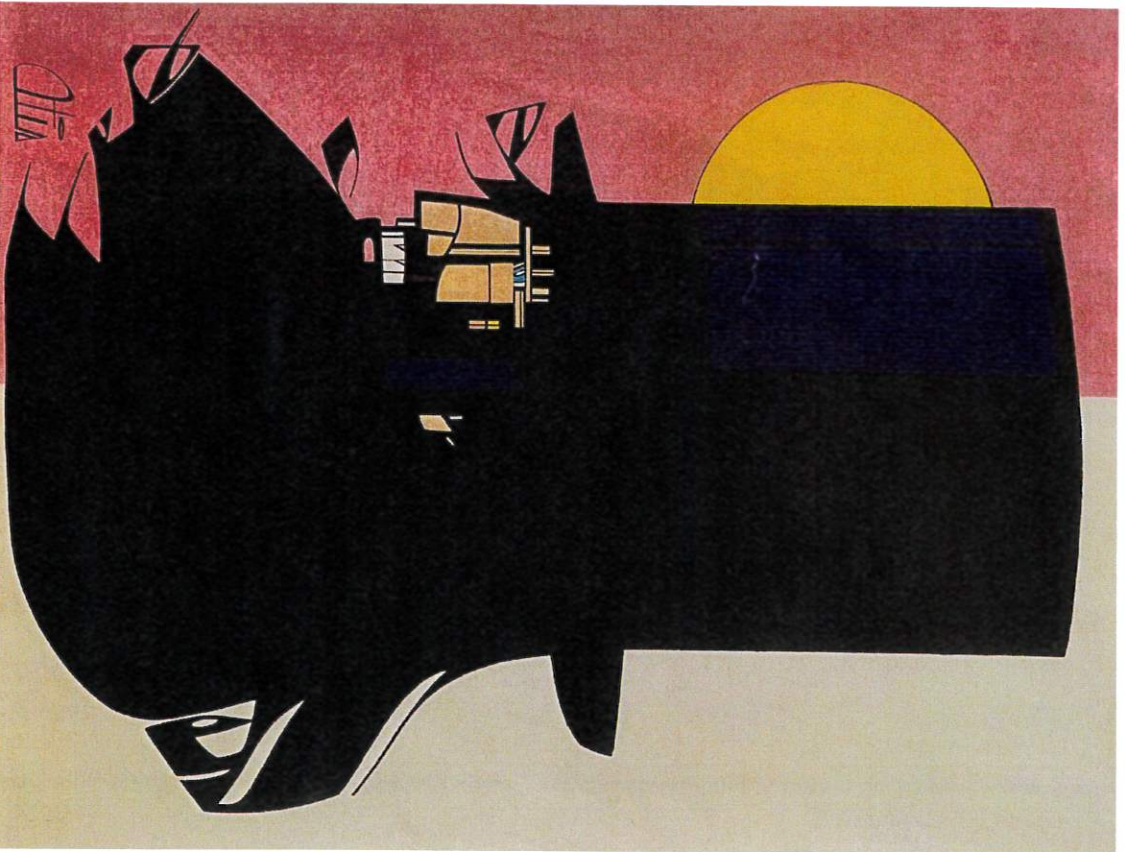
Forgiveness is not a one size fits all action. According to the article entitled, "How Advent Helps Us Forgive," Travis Roberts writes about four forms of forgiveness. The first form is "the ceasefire." This form of forgiveness allows both parties to put aside the unforgiveness to celebrate at a family function or a special event. "Earned forgiveness" is when the offender apologizes for something they have done to the offended. Next, "therapeutic forgiveness," is when the offended chooses to forgive the offender before he or she can ask to be forgiven. Finally, there is the "God forgives man" form of forgiveness. Both women and men have experienced and continue to experience the forgiveness of God through His Son's death on the Cross. According to Roberts, "It is this Gospel forgiveness that we celebrate every Advent: the forgiveness that brings ultimate peace. It is the forgiveness of God reaching down to us out of kindness and mercy with the stated intent of creating a new people who will worship God and love one another. It is eternal shalom, not détente. It is offered, not earned. It is other-focused, not self-healing. It is peace."

After 14 years of harboring unforgiveness in her heart, my friend, Lisa, decided to extend therapeutic forgiveness to her offender. Lisa's father, her offender, abandoned her mother, two siblings, and herself when she was eight years old. As an impressionable third grader, Lisa began to internalize the abandonment and felt that she had done something wrong causing her father to leave. When she became aware of his adulterous relationship and expectancy of a new baby, the layer of anger thickened the unforgiveness in her heart. Lisa was deeply hurt and felt the pain of rejection. Her father eventually was accepted back into their home, but not into Lisa's heart. Her mother and father reconciled; however, resentment, bitterness, and hatred had taken root in Lisa's heart. My dear friend lived this way for years. When she was twenty-two years old, Lisa said, "I recognized that unforgiveness had imprisoned and controlled me; I had become cruel and spiteful towards my father." Lisa didn't like the person she had become especially since she was a devout Christian. She went to her father, told him that she forgave him for leaving their family, and apologized for the years of bitter treatment.

Lisa forgave her father, but she could only do so once she realized the "God forgives man" form of forgiveness she had received through Jesus Christ. The gift of forgiveness is an act of love the offended one gives to themselves, regardless of the attitude of the offender. True forgiveness gives peace and peace has its foundation in believing in God.

We are granted peace when the gift of forgiveness is extended. Forgiveness can only be given when we believe and trust in God's Redemption Plan. Mary gained favor because she believed. Joseph gained strength to lead his family because he believed. The Wise Men and Shepherds gained admission to be in the presence of Emmanuel (God with us) because they believed. Simeon and Prophetess Anna believed and trusted God for many years. They were granted long life and the opportunity to see the Redeemer, the Christ Child. When you and I believe in God's Redemption Plan, we receive the gift of

forgiveness. With our trust in God and belief in His Holy Word, we can extend the gift of forgiveness to ourselves and to others.



"Scrooge"

Otis White , mixed media

# The Fourth Day of Advent: The Gift of Poetry

Dalphine Sharese Woodard  
December 4, 2024

Matthew 1:18-21 NIV

*This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream....*

## Speak The Dream

The sun, stars, and moon gaze upon me,  
the eyes of deception and fear watch me  
as I sleep, someone prays for me.  
As I sleep I dream....

While my mother cries for me I dream.

While my father recalls the last time  
he saw my face, I dream.

I speak to heaven and  
ask why!!!!

Why must I navigate through this  
life misunderstood and mistreated. I pray  
that heaven is not like it is on earth. But  
I pray and strive to provide my gifts  
to this world. Sharing the heaven in me.  
I gaze back at the sun, stars, and moon  
studying their movements. Hoping the way  
they sway and move will give me guidance.  
My mother no longer cries for me, her  
last tears have dried from this world.

My father.... I wonder if he still misses  
me, wherever he may be.  
I pray. I sleep. I dream with all intention  
to be accepting to God's will.



"Speak the Dream"

Dalphine Sharese Woodard, acrylic



# The Fifth Day of Advent: The Gift of Laughter

John David June  
December 5, 2024

Matthew 1:1-2

*A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ (GOD saves, anointed one) the son of David (beloved), the son of Abraham (father of multitudes): Abraham was the father of Isaac (laughter), Isaac the father of Jacob (heal holder), Jacob the father of Judah (praise) and his brothers....*

The gift of laughter is a very powerful gift, and its power can change everything.

It is truly a gift that keeps on giving, and I have shared, the gift of laughter with friend and foe.

The gift of laughter can be happy or sad, the laughter sounds the same.

The gift of laughter can ease your pain.

The gift of laughter can make a difference in your day.

The gift of laughter can build a strong relationship.

The gift of laughter can stop anger in its tracks.

The gift of laughter is a reminder of what happiness sounds like.

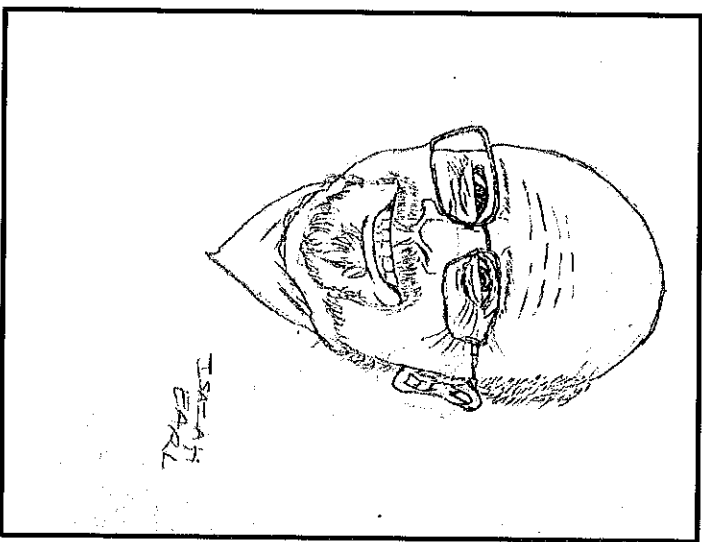
The gift of laughter can be just what you needed.

The gift of laughter can spread joy to all.

The gift of laughter sometimes has to be introduced to others.

And if you didn't know, the gift of laughter is free for all.

Amen



"Man Laughing" Isaiah Earl, pencil

# The Sixth Day of Advent: The Gift of Words

Anna Romano

December 6, 2024

Luke 1:18-22 NIV

*Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." The angel answered, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at the proper time." Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.*

As a child, I barely spoke. Everything I said felt empty, hollow. Intimidation and fear controlled my life. I did not know who to trust. Adults repeated, "Sticks and stones might break your bones..." But I thought to myself, "Yeah, but those words you use are crushing me." Silence seemed the best solution. It felt safe. It felt secure. I decided to stop using my words.

I mistook silence for a gift. Through it, I could not be betrayed or harmed. And some of my peers liked this quality I embraced. They said I listened well and gave me their secrets to keep. Getting along with others was a piece of cake. If only they knew how my heart ached.

As I aged, little changed. I remained quiet, reserved, distant. Until the depression started to show, and I could no longer hide

my pain. The hospital became like a second home. Doctors were baffled. They tried every drug, every therapy. But I still could not find the courage to speak.

God did not seem relevant at the time. I did not grow up hearing His Word. I walked through life lost deep in the wilderness.

But God found a way to reach me. Well, He had to shout a bit. When I finally cried out, He did not hesitate.

I never believed things could change until I walked through Triune's doors. The scales slowly fell from my eyes. I saw God at work. While I listened and watched, a transformation began. I learned about God: His Love, Grace, and His Word.

Triune has a lot of teachers and helpers – pastors, staff, and other parishioners. They have shown me God's Word in action. I have witnessed the power of loving thy neighbor. I learned the value of saying hello. I discovered the gift of a simple smile. I continue to receive words of support and encouragement, empowering me to heal and grow. And, as I trudge down my road, I can call out for help to navigate any fractures or holes.

It took a few years before I trusted my voice. (I still question everything I say.) But God's Word never wavers. He promises to meet us wherever we are, a beacon of light in a dark world. It is a light carrying hope, peace, joy, and love - a call to remember the gift of His Word while we wait for the birth of His Son.



"Doodle"

Anna Romano, pen & ink

# The Seventh Day of Advent: The Gift of Breath

Bamby Roy

December 7, 2024

John 3:8 NIV

*"The wind (spirit, breath of God) blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."*

Life in the Breath

Not a burden but a person in disguise behind the lies

Masquerading, spirit fading into nothingness tries

To take me down deeper than the core of the earth

But Heaven breathes inside of me

He lifts me up on stable ground

A deep breath slows down the soul

It gives life to what is new and honors what is old

I breathe out my story, I breathe in some of yours

I cannot hold it to myself. It is breathed in and then back out

Spirit uplifted and mask removed, my breath is sweeter now.

Breathing in the gift of life and breathing out as to the King I bow

Now I lay me down to rest, I thank God for my breath.

A gift to be a part of oxygen for someone else now

Each breath is a moment stamped in time

Beautifully unique as a fingerprint

The breath comes and then it goes

From Adam until now, the breath has been passed down

from the one who wears the crown

What will you do with yours?

**\*Moment of noticing your breath:**

Place a mirror in front of your face and breathe on it. Marvel at the gift you've been given and choose how you will use it, because as soon as it is breathed, it fades. Breath is a beautiful gift from God.



Untitled

Bamby Roy, watercolor ink

# The Eighth Day of Advent: The Gift of Being at Triune Mercy Center

JoAnn Martin

December 8, 2024

Luke 1:46-49

NIV

*And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me – hold is his name.*

At Triune I see the reason why Jesus died on the cross. I see the grace of God's amazing love – unconditional. I see all nationalities, all races, all classes, all God's people joyfully living life. I see us all enjoying God's mercy on earth with heaven's gift of loving one another as we walk the journey of life until Christ comes again.

I believe God sent me to Triune Mercy to have a Church to witness people serving humanity with unconditional love each day.

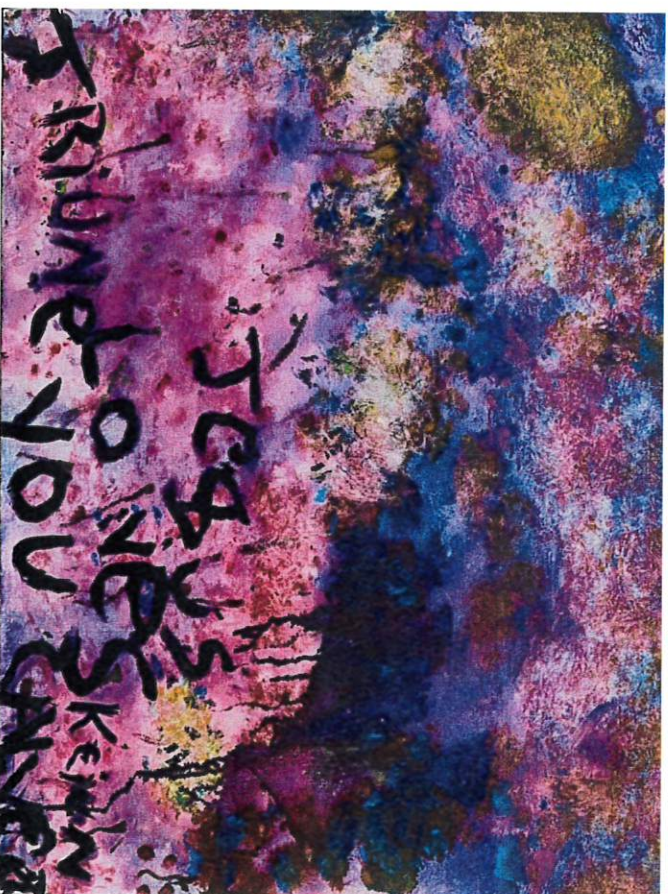
On this journey of life, none of us is perfect. We make choices that we intend to be good often turn out evil. And that's when we need the love of God and one another the most. God knew that we needed Jesus, his Spirit, and his wisdom to make choices that we do not have the wisdom to make. That's why I believe with my whole heart that I'm meant to be here at Triune – because God's plan is working here. It's for me to be a member here to see others honoring the unconditional love that God has for all people.

At Triune Mercy Center there's music for all races, color and Creeds. The sermons are about the love of God; they're not judgmental assaults that tear people down. Sermons at Triune build people up. We are so important to God that Jesus died on

the cross for you and me. We are so loved that Jesus, who lived in Paradise, put aside the glory of Heaven to make his place right beside us in this world of sin, trials and tribulations. Therefore, we can enter in God's rest and have Heaven right here on earth.

I imagine he was tempted just like me. And he knows the weight of a heavy load. I imagine him saying, "JoAnn, take my yoke – for my burdens are light. Rest and come with me on this journey of life for I am the only one that has gone before and have prepared a place for you." I imagine him coming again and gathering us all together. I dream of a new world with no more sin. No more death. I see the beginnings of this dream right here.

I am JoAnn Martin, Child Of God and Member of Triune Mercy Center where God's Unconditional Love Shines.



"Triune, Jesus Loves You"

Kevin Calvert, acrylic

# The Ninth Day of Advent: The Gift of Joy

Tandy Taylor

December 9, 2024

Luke 1:50-52 NIV

*His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.*

On a recent pilgrimage to civil rights sites in Birmingham, Alabama, I visited the 16th Street Baptist Church, where four young girls were killed in a bombing on September 15, 1963. On the day before school desegregation was scheduled to begin, this Klan violence shocked the nation and became one of the primary catalysts leading to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Prior to the bombing, the 16th Street Church had been known as the gathering place of the Birmingham movement: civil rights leaders would meet here with potential demonstrators, to train them for civil disobedience and non-violent resistance. These meetings would end with the joyful singing of freedom songs. I was moved by the powerful video of this joyful singing as they prepared to encounter imminent hatred and violence.

Songs of joy? How could they possibly be joyful? The Black community in Birmingham had been assaulted by horrific violence in the past few months alone, so much so that Birmingham was nicknamed "Bombingham."

· In the spring of 1963, Birmingham's White policemen used police dogs to attack nonviolent civil rights protestors in Kelly Ingram Park just across the street from the 16th Street Church.

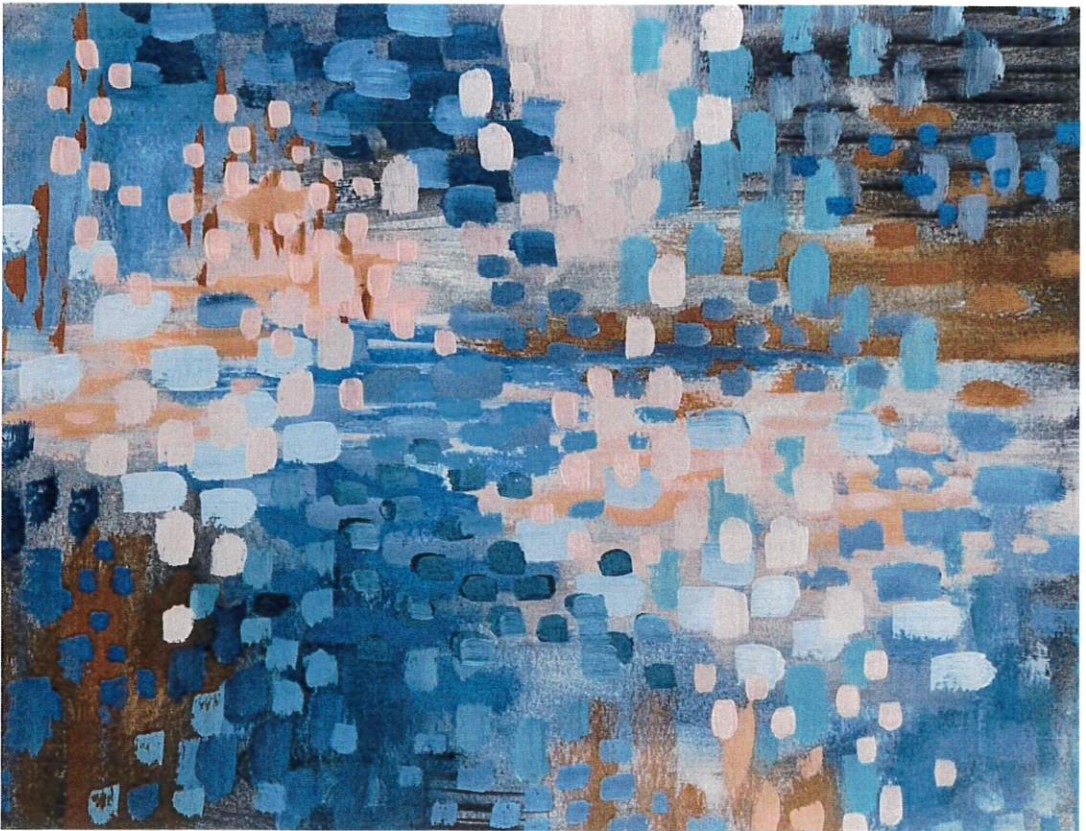
· Shortly after that, Martin Luther King Jr. and other movement leaders Ralph Abernathy and Fred Shuttlesworth were arrested and jailed. It was from this jail that King wrote his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail."

· Only weeks later, during another protest at Kelly Ingram Park, Bull Connor ordered firemen to train high-powered water hoses on Black youth.

· Only weeks following that, Klansmen tried to assassinate Dr. King by bombing the A.G. Gaston Motel, where King and other movement leaders stayed and planned strategy. That same day, the Klan bombed the home of Dr. King's brother A.D. King.

In the midst of all this violence, how could they possibly be joyful? We think of joy coming only after all the problems are solved, only after the violence is over, only after the struggle has been won. These courageous, Spirit-filled sisters and brothers show us that God gives the gift of joy, even and especially in the midst of pain and fear and injustice and horror. God was the source of their joy. Their joy was not dependent on outward circumstances. Their joy was a way of thumbing their noses at the power of evil and death and violence.

Two thousand years ago, when the angels appeared to the shepherds, announcing "good news of great joy," the struggle was not over; sin and death and violence were still part of the human experience. But this good news of great joy sustains us even now in the midst of the struggle. Thanks be to God!



"Belonging"  
Constantine, acrylic

Rebecca

# The Tenth Day of Advent: The Gift of Song – an Answered Prayer

Carol Gibson

December 10, 2024

Luke 1:26-28

*In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."*

From the time I was a toddler, I have been drawn to music - even playing a toy piano at age three – to the amazement of my family.

Between ages 6 and 11, we lived next door to my aunt Nell who owned a piano. At every opportunity, I would "play" "Chop Sticks" and songs I made up in the sheer joy of playing.

I wanted to take piano lessons, but my father, who was raised during the "Depression", thought this a frivolous indulgence even though the lessons were nominally priced.

When I was in the fourth grade, someone came to our classroom asking for a volunteer to accompany the students marching into our school's weekly assembly. Without hesitation, my hand went up. No one thought to check out my skills. This was a good thing considering I couldn't play anything but "Chopsticks."

On the appointed date, I walked to the piano and started to play. Though I had tried to learn the "Marine Hymn" from my cousin who took piano lessons, I found it too difficult to memorize, so I reverted to "Chopsticks" and the vague Indian

song which were all I knew. Walking home after school a neighborhood kid asked, "Who played that awful processional music at assembly?" But I was prouder of playing than being embarrassed.

Fast forward to forty. I was sitting at the baby grand piano that my husband had purchased for me. Still with no formal lessons, I taught myself to play from the Baldwin Series of Easy Classics and a Methodist hymnal. I had painstakingly memorized certain songs, though I had to play them very slowly due to the fact that I didn't know the correct fingering. It took me forever to get through a song.

Then came the two days I will never forget. I was slowly plodding through a hymn and wanting so much to be able to have my family sing while I accompanied. In frustration, I cried out to God a heartfelt prayer-----"Will I have to be in Heaven before I am able to play this instrument?" I didn't realize He would answer that prayer in a matter of days.

The second day came on the heels of my prayer of frustration. Betty, my closest friend from church, mentioned a lady she knew at church who was helping people play the piano by teaching chords. Betty and I went to Beverly's home. I sat down with her at her piano and she showed me some of the common chords, like C, D, G – and how they could be played in different progressions and compliment one another.

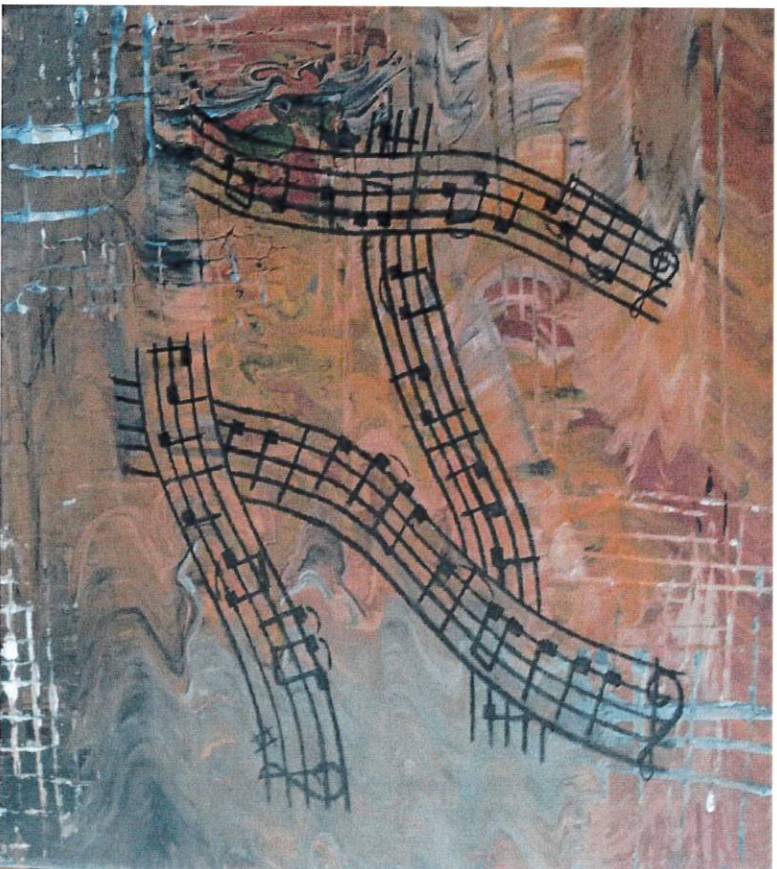
All of a sudden, a lightning bolt hit me! I saw the mystery of the elusive keyboard! I was so moved. I had to dig my fingernails into my hands to keep from sobbing out loud. Beverly wrote out a hymn and above the lyrics, put down the chords she had shown me. Then I sat down and played the chords as we sang the hymn.



This was a life changing moment. Over the next few months, I memorized chord after chord and played song after song. I bought a chorded Christmas Carol book, and at our family's Christmas get together, I played the piano and my family sang.

I'm still moved to tears by this story of God's love and goodness in answering a prayer that meant so much. Today I write lyrics and melodies for songs I create – using the piano chords to help me.

I will never stop praising God for His wonderful gift of song!!!!



“Untitled Song”

Johnny Gibson, acrylic and ink

# The Eleventh Day of Advent: The Gifts of Triune

Don Austin

December 11, 2024

Luke 1:67-72 NIV

*"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his hold prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us – to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant...."*

The gifts of Triune Mercy center – where do I start? Because there are so many. I guess it could have started around fourteen years ago. It was a beautiful day in January 2010 when I started working at Triune Mercy Center. Actually, it was not so much a job as it was a calling from God.

I came to Triune Mercy Center with a lot of wreckage from my past. Triune is a church first and I got closer to God here. What a gift that was.

I also was able to work on my recovery here. Triune has N/A and A/A meetings and we use to have Celebrate Recovery – which helped me stay clean and sober one day at a time. Another gift from Triune.

I was able to use the resources that Triune provides to get a full pardon from the state of S. C. and all my citizen rights were given back. I also was able to get everything expunged. What a gift!

I was homeless for a period and now I'm a homeowner.

I suffered from the disease of addiction for a long time and now I've been clean and sober for over twenty years.

Triune also help me to become a Certified Peer Support Specialist and a Recovery coach to give back and help others. Wow!

On October 21st, 2024, I will have had twenty-one years clean and sober. What an amazing gift from God.

With all the resources that are available here, Triune Mercy Center is truly a gift – available to everyone.

I thank God for Triune Mercy Center.

I am a new man because of the Gifts of Triune.

"GOD BLESS."



"Hands Helping Hands"

Fred Wood, watercolor

# The Twelfth Day of Advent: The Gift of Being Seen

Trevor Scott Barton  
December 12, 2024

*John 1:10-12*

*He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God....*

One summer evening, I was sitting on a bench on Main Street reading my worn copy of "Cry The Beloved Country." I marveled at the way Alan Paton listened carefully to life and wrote about it.

I began writing in my notebook, listening to the life around me. I saw an old man shuffling by.

He wore a tattered raincoat, baggy pants splattered with mud, and leather shoes with the sides split out of them. His shoes revealed sockless, bruised feet that were battered by the hard streets.

I watched him quietly, without speaking, only listening, as he passed by.

He wasn't speaking to me or to anyone around him. Or was he?

"Maybe," I thought, "Just maybe the most important things in life are quiet and speak twice as much to us without words."

I listened in a way I had never listened before.

I listened carefully to the old man's face.

Yes, I listened to his face.

I listened to each wrinkle along his forehead.

"What made that wrinkle?" I asked myself. "Was it laughter...or tears? Is it natural old age...or deep suffering? Was it carefree living...or a heavy, heavy heart?"

I listened to the sadness in his watery blue eyes.

"Why are you looking down as you shuffle by?" I asked myself.

"Are you holding back tears? What have you seen with those eyes?"

And I listened to his dirty, unshaven cheeks.

"Do you have anyone to take care of you?" I thought. "Are you lonely...are you alone?"

Listening carefully to faces is hard work and has to be developed slowly over time.

We live in a world that teaches us to speak twice as much as we listen, or to speak without listening at all.

Yet, over time, listening to faces will grow the most important thing we can have in our hearts — empathy for each person we encounter every day.

And, over time, listening to faces will grow the most important thing we can have in our hands and feet and, indeed, words — simple kindness.

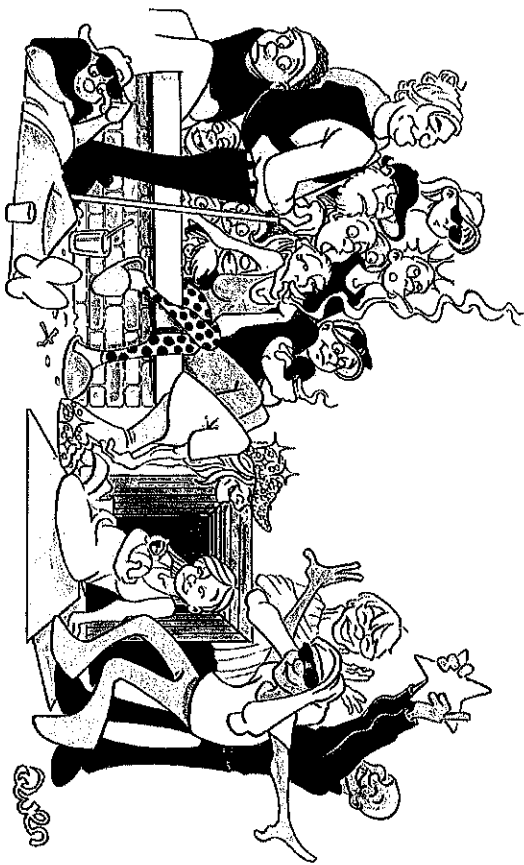
Listening to faces can help us see the unseen, see people for the very first time.

I put my arm around the shoulder of a shuffling old man.

“Would you like to sit down and have a cup of coffee with me?”  
I asked.

Because I listened to a face, I found a friend.

In that moment, listening helped my invisible friend be seen.



“Nativity @ 222 Rutherford”  
media

Owen Robertson, mixed

# The Thirteenth Day of Advent: The Gift of Knowing Your Name

Natosha Means  
December 13, 2024

Matthew 1:23 NIV

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

My name is Natosha. I was born on December 24, 1973. I was "a gift from God."

My name would carry me through life – and allow me to withstand the bullying, abuse, pain and lies that would be heaped on me.

It seemed like everyone used to pick on me. They made fun of my name, "She thinks she's special because she was 'born at Christmas.'" People with browner hair and darker skin made fun of my blonde hair and light skin. They called me "odd."

The number of butt spankings I received seemed to be determined by how many lies were told on my name for doing things I never did. It seemed the whole world loved to laugh and laugh at the unnecessary beatings I got.

Life was so dysfunctional – it seemed like a constant fight. Once I was bigger and older I was not beat as much, because I had learned how to fight too. I had learned how to survive. To retaliate. To hurt back.

I hoped school would be a safe place. But it wasn't. I thought the teachers would protect me. But no. One teacher would pinch my cheeks so hard that I'd cry. Another loved to mark my work wrong. She even marked the work my tutor had

helped me with wrong. I was kept back a grade which was even more humiliating.

I never thought I knew what love was until I met my first boyfriend. We met in tenth grade and we dated secretly for some years. I thought I had found my savior, but I was wrong.

I was kicked out of school at seventeen for being pregnant. Life was hard. I needed help as a first-time mother. My own mother helped me some. She had this stand-offish way about her, but she loved my son.

At nineteen I wanted to try life on my own. I wanted to party. Then I met my first husband. Life was great – until we got married.

The abuse was crazy.

After years of raising my boys, I met my next husband. We stayed together for seventeen years. We had a son together. He was unfaithful multiple times and he was emotionally abusive. I ended that relationship.

After all this, I can say I made it through. My name is "a gift." In some languages, Natosha means, "Resurrection." Or "strong and powerful."

It reminds me that through all the mess, God was and is with me. I've been working hard. I am almost free from all the strongholds. Slowly. Surely.

I am in the church now – waiting to discover my calling or destiny. Maybe one day I will become a leader like the promise of my name. There has to be a secret plan for me

My name is Natosha. It also means, "born on Christmas Day."



"Necklace"

Sparkle, Fused Glass

# The Fourteenth Day of Advent: The Gift of the Journey to Be More Like

Christ Tenicia Daniels

December 14, 2024

Matthew 7:13-14 CSB

*“Enter through the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the road is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who go through it. How narrow is the gate and difficult is the road that leads to life, and few find it.”*

Navigating this life as a follower of Christ comes with sacrifice. As Christ sacrificed His life for ours, so, that we might live and not die, He expects us to be holy as He is.

But what do we have to give up – and are we willing to? Let's not make the journey about us. It should be about Christ, to live in His image, love like him, listen like Him, speak like Him.

From the anticipation of His birth to His birth, understanding the life of Christ and what it means to us all. All the way to the second coming. As we live this life, it is necessary to walk in light of Him, in His light, gaining strength through His message. That is the exemplary courage, strength, and righteousness to alignment with the Father.

Through unmerited favor, His grace, we have been given the power of the Holy Spirit to live in such a way.

**“For you are from God, little children, and you have conquered them, because the one who is in you is greater than he that is in the world.”** 1 John 4:4 CSB

Imagine having to navigate this dark world without light and power.

By looking to the Son of hope, for hope, in all seasons because He too has been through all we have and was without sin. Trusting that His life has given us access to righteousness and

to live this life, by the redemption of the cross. So, then we are able to walk a life that is in step with Him by His spirit by faith through grace. And as life's challenges come and go, we can hold onto hope in the grace that sustains the vision of God.

And through Christ's strength, by faith, we may find our way to Christ likeness.

**“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”**  
Philippians 4:13 CSV

**“Now unto him who is able to do exceedingly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us.”** Ephesians 3:20 CSV

In order to achieve any resemblance of this we must know the heart of the Father, who loved us so much that He gave His only begotten Son for us.

**“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.”** John 3:16 CSV

Hope . Peace . Love . Long-suffering



"Journey to Bethlehem"

Andrew Predmore, colored pencil



# The Fifteenth Day of Advent: The Gift of Home

Joel Armistead  
December 15, 2024

Matthew 2:6 NIV

*“But you Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.”*

I was raised in a very strict, fundamentalist religious environment. My father was a “hell-fire and brimstone” preacher. I tried to be good; and though I sometimes strayed from the straight and narrow path, I didn’t want to go to hell.

Throughout my high school and early college years, I was very active in my church and became a youth leader.

When I registered with the Selective Service at age eighteen, I registered as a “conscientious objector to combat service,” (IAO draft classification.) My father had been a conscientious objector during World War II. He had always taught me that “true Christians had no place in the military.” However, I still felt a patriotic duty to my country. My classification meant that, if drafted, I would go into the military in a non-combat role. (Most IAOs went to Vietnam front lines as medics.)

Over the next four years, my beliefs evolved to a realization that any role that I played in the military contributed to the war effort. In keeping with my religious beliefs, I had to change my draft classification to “conscientious objector to military service” (1O draft classification.) With that classification, if drafted, I still was obligated to serve two years of civilian service “contributing to the health, welfare, and safety of the nation.” To apply for this classification change, I would have to present an explanation of how my beliefs had changed. One key part of my explanation was a pamphlet stating the “Articles of Faith” of our church.

The pamphlet admonished us to be consistent in serving our government, but not in aiding or abetting the taking of human life. I planned to include a copy in my appeal. It would carry more weight if I had a personal letter from my pastor, stating that my beliefs were consistent with the teachings of our congregation. Instead of support, I received a stern rebuke for being led astray by forces outside of our church – and condemnation for my lack of patriotism. I was crushed, confused, and abandoned. I left the church in search of support of my pacifist beliefs elsewhere.

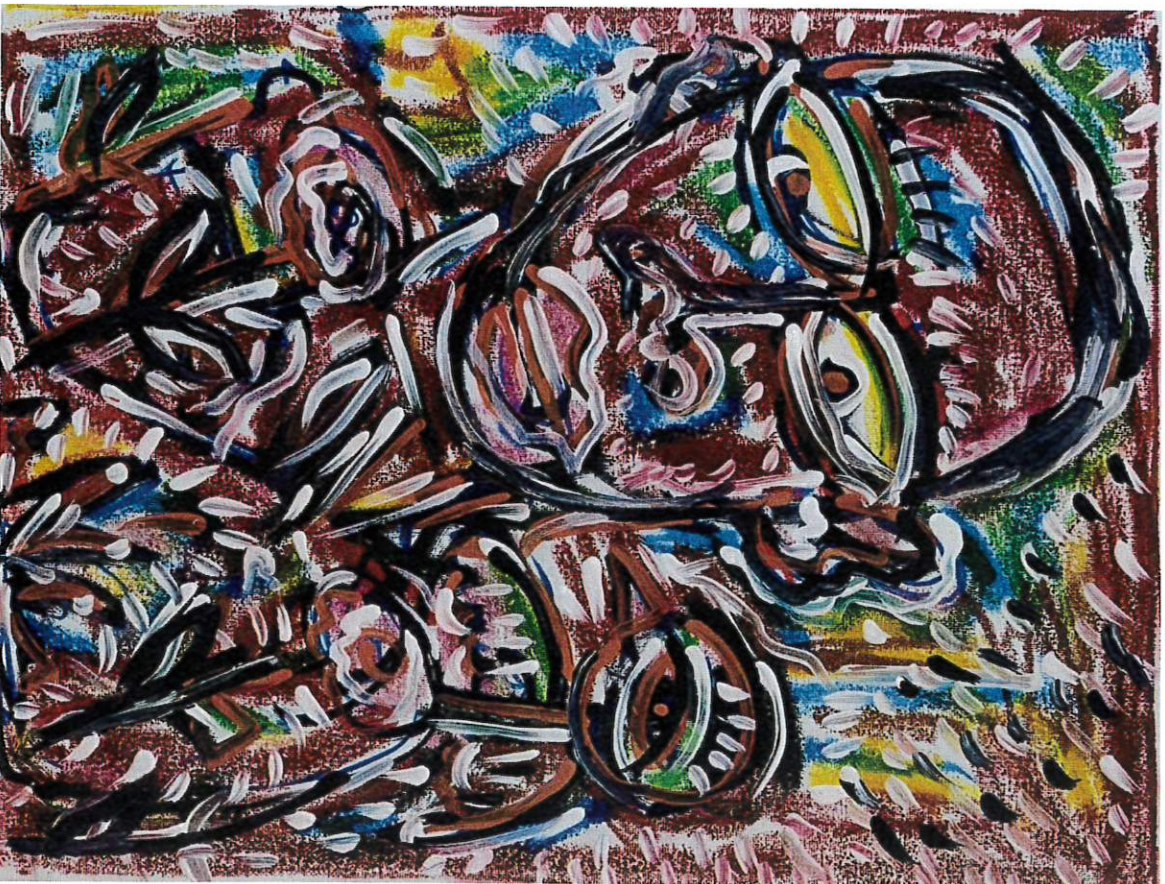
Thus began a long spiritual journey. I gravitated toward very liberal congregations; however, they seemed to be more philosophical societies rather than religious groups. They went to great lengths to avoid using the “G-word.” I dabbled in eastern religions, but I kept coming back to the New Testament teachings of Jesus Christ, a message of love and compassion rather than a code of conduct consisting of a lot of “thou shall nots.” I wandered in and out of most of the various mainstream protestant denominations, but their lack of tolerance seemed to be inconsistent with their professed compassion. Spiritually, I felt “homeless.”

In 2010, I had an accident and spent two and a half months at Roger C. Peace Rehabilitation Hospital. I prayed every morning, every night, and between therapy sessions. I promised God that I would find a church. I felt homeless.

I began attending a weekly lecture series sponsored by Furman University. One week, the host, Vince Moore, invited his wife, Deb Richardson-Moore, to talk about her book, “The Weight of Mercy.” I was intrigued and I read her book. I came to a Sunday service at Triune Mercy Center. I saw a very diverse congregation, witnessing city council members worshipping alongside homeless people. The First Sunday of the month rolled around and I was invited to God’s open table and took communion without any question about whether I was “worthy.” Sunday after Sunday, I found myself worshipping with a very diverse group of people who didn’t judge each other, but

greeted each other with, "You are God's child, and you are welcome in this place."

I was at HOME!



"Self-Portrait"

Jon Osborne, acrylic

# The Sixteenth Day of Advent: The Gift of Story

Amy Bowlin

December 16, 2024

Luke 1:1-4

*Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.*

There is nothing better than a “good” story. Whether it is a “happily ever after,” a “who dun it?” or something inspiring, humans have told stories from the beginning of time.

Storytelling is an art and one of the oldest learning tools used to pass history from one generation to another. As we reflect on the Advent of Jesus, there is no better gift than to consider the incredible story of His birth.

With any good story arc, there has to be complexity, escalation, tension, moments of truth, and a climax. Way back in Genesis 3:15, we are told that there is a “knot,” a tangle in humanity that only God can set right. Humans chose a path different than God’s intended direction, and the story shifted into a new dimension. Through the deception of Satan, humans were in crisis and desperately needed help.

*“And I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”*

Humanity and Satan were now on a collision course. Pain, sorrow, anger, and hatred were being woven into the tapestry of

each person’s story. The tension in the story was at a pivotal place and the only solution was the arrival of a perfect Savior.

During the lowest and darkest chapter of any story, there is often only a glimmer of hope. It is when we are in the “valley of the shadow” that we have to have a moment of truth so we do not lose hope. Isaiah 7:14 is the prophetic declaration that hope is coming.

*“Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”*

What could this even mean? How will a virgin conceive? How could a baby save humanity from its nemesis? Where can we find hope? Talk about a cliffhanger! The clue to this tale is the name Immanuel. God With Us! No longer are we facing our enemy alone. The hero of our story has come through Jesus.

This celestial blockbuster even identifies the location for the arrival of God on planet Earth. From Micah 5:2 we learn:

*“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”*

The knot and tangle of despair across the world is loosening. A collective sigh covers the earth with the birth of Jesus. There is a phrase from Micah that is the focus for us during Advent.

*“Come for me.”* As the credits roll and the music crescendos, imagine that the one who loves you enough to send Jesus has **come for you**. The gift of this story is that we have all been claimed, we are wanted, we are never alone. How will you pass on this hope? Who needs to hear your story?



"Immanuel – The Gift of God" Russell Dodd, mixed media

# The Seventeenth Day of Advent:

## The Gift of Belonging: Reimagining the Gifts

Melinda Dukes

December 17, 2024

Matthew 2: 10-11

*When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.*

As a child, I found the gifts of the Wise Men—gold, frankincense and myrrh—puzzling. What use would a baby have for gold? How much candy could “Frankenstein’s cents” buy? Could “Myrrh” make a baby laugh? Now I understand that each gift held a spiritual significance – gold symbolizing royalty, frankincense divinity, and myrrh humanity.

Royalty, divinity, and humanity—what modern gift could embody these? Perhaps the Gift of Belonging encompasses them all. Much of what I have learned about belonging, I learned at Triune.

### The Royal Kingdom

Belonging is feeling known and understood. The metaphor of a royal household emphasizes the importance of everyone recognizing our togetherness and our place in this world. Everyone knows the king, the king knows his subjects, and all recognize the power of the household.

I often take belonging for granted, but a recent visit to another church left me with a clear understanding of what it is like to “not belong.” Everything in the space was familiar – except the faces – and the message. Where was the talk of justice? Where were the words reminding us that we are all sinners in need of belonging? After the service, I knew that I belong at Triune. This place has taught me that belonging has power—the power to work for justice in our community, the power to be in

fellowship with others who do not look like me, and the power of grace.

### Divine Connection

Belonging is connection with and to someone. In a recent Bible Study discussion, a member shared how the idea of belonging reminded them of Native American communal living spaces. Communal living is alive with the sharing of resources, mutual support, and meaningful, cooperative relationships. For most of my life, I had not thought of being in a communal relationship with God. Being in a relationship with anyone seemed like hard work so I kept my belongingness limited – working full time while being a wife, a mother, a daughter, and a sister was enough for me. How in the world was I to find time for more relationships?

Arriving in the Triune parking lot, I look for the spot that allows me to see our mural. It’s a powerful message that “we are seen, we are valued, and we are heard” regardless of where we come from. We all have a place in this kingdom and living in this spiritual community with each other strengthens our relationship to God.

### Humanity

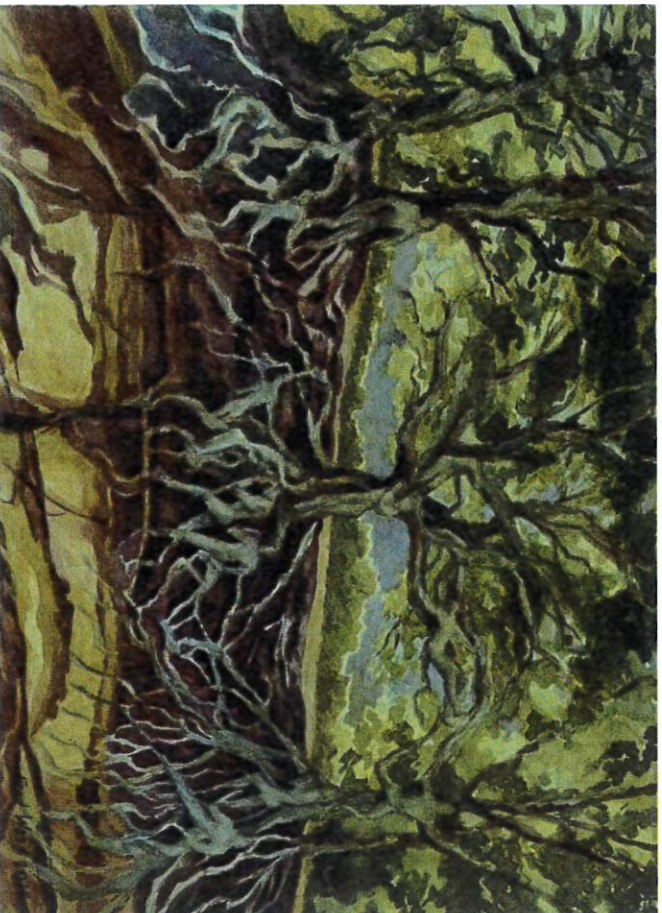
Belonging is safety and choice. I grew up in a family which provided physical and emotional safety. I did not choose to belong – I just did. There was one choice I faced as I got older and that was “to behave.” Often, I failed to realize that I was not making the “behave” choice when eating the last chocolate chip cookie. My sisters were quick to point out my failures. Their accusations questioned my ability to be a decent human. These sibling spats taught me that the safety and acceptance of belonging in our world is accompanied by responsibility and choice. After all, I did choose to take the last chocolate chip cookie!

Being a responsible human is hard because I want all the cookies without baking, sharing, or cleaning up. For years, I lived this way – didn’t everyone? I had problems and asked

God to solve them. Solutions rarely appeared so I was not interested in taking my time to develop a spiritual connection. Being human was just too complicated and my lack of connection and purpose was simply the consequence of surviving in a messed-up world. Now, I realize that spiritual safety comes with choosing to show up, “to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with my God” (*Micah 6*) even when wanting all the cookies for myself.

### **And Then They Opened Their Treasures**

I fondly recall my “Frankenstein’s cents” and this early memory opens the door to many others. Each Advent, we are all invited, we all can choose, and we all are welcome to participate in the Royal Kingdom, the grace of Divine Connection, and the complex choices of Humanity.



“The Hidden Life of Trees”

Fred Wood, watercolor

## The Eighteenth Day of Advent: The Gift of Music

Charles Hedgepath  
December 18, 2024

Luke 2: 28-32

*Simeon took him (the newborn Jesus) in his arms and praised God, saying: "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."*

I've always believed music is the greatest gift that has been given to us.

It's been the greatest gift to me and I'm forever thankful for it. It's something shared for all.

However, I was challenged by a friend that laughter was the greatest gift – and it too was shared by all.

What laughter and music share is being spontaneous.

Where they differ is music literally is the soundtrack of life.

It's hard to imagine anything without it.

Although it may not be noticed, it's there.

Laughter is wonderful but music can carry us through a range of emotions from love to loss.

Either way, we need to laugh, and we need to sing.

Although neither provides for our physical needs, the fact is we'd be lost without them.

So, laugh, sing, and love one another!

That may be the best gift we can bring to the baby Jesus.

Afterall, what child doesn't love laughter?  
What child doesn't dance to music?  
And every child needs love – even Bethlehem's child.



" $+7-7=Dream$ "

Dalphine Sharese Woodard, acrylic

# The Nineteenth Day of Advent: The Gift of Joy – Anna's Frog

Kathy Sharp

December 19, 2024

Luke 2:9-10

*An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy...."*

One recent Sunday morning, I wasn't feeling much like going to church but convinced myself that I should – it does usually make me feel better. While the Sunday School hour provided a lot of good discussion and thought – my mind wasn't going in a positive direction and I left feeling a bit more down than when I came. Since I was already at church, I decided I might as well stay for worship – hoping that would help my mood.

I sat next to my friend Anna and started to feel a bit better. About halfway through the service, still feeling pretty low, I felt a sudden plop on my leg. Looking down, I came face to face with Anna's frog. My spirits lifted immediately. This frog, of course, is not real. It's a soft, squishy, stuffed one that is usually in attendance at worship whenever Anna is there. That frog stayed with me for the rest of the service; I even took it up with me for communion.

For those who aren't familiar with Anna's frog, the significant thing is that frog – F.R.O.G. – stands for "Fulfilling Relying On God." For me it is a reminder of how poor a job I tend to do with relying on God. It's a reminder of how important it is to know where and in whom I should put my trust.

But even more significant was that someone sensed that I could use some encouragement and shared a symbol of that encouragement with me at a moment when I really needed it. It

made me smile and made me feel better. It was a moment of joy.

Heartfelt acts of encouragement – both large and small – do tend to bring me joy. Both when I receive them and when I am the one performing them. In this season of hoping and waiting, I hope we are all able to be both givers and receivers of moments of joy through acts of kindness and encouragement to those around us.



"Wildflowers with Frog"

Christy Lee Peeks, marker



# The Twentieth Day of Advent: The Gift of Being Seen

Tim Turner  
December 20, 2024

Luke 2:8-12 NIV

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

Reading Luke 2, we're told that flocks of sheep were being (over) SEEN by their shepherds.

These shepherds were SEEN by an angel, then a heavenly host of angels (and directed to go and SEE "this thing that had happened").

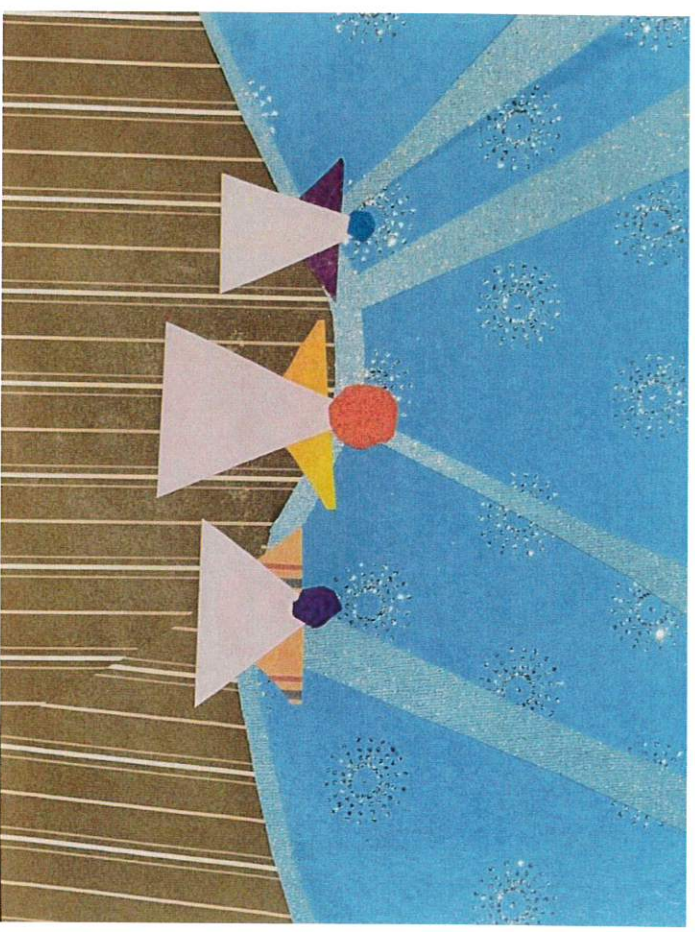
The shepherds traveled and SAW the Christ Child. They recognized and accepted Him for Who He Was.

Afterwards, it was most important to them to spread the Word of His birth.

They then returned to their daily lives praising God for "all" the things they had heard and SEEN! To truly experience their Faith made SIGHT, it was imperative that they not accept or praise only in part. This unfathomable event they had witnessed had to be taken in in its entirety. In His entirety!

God The Father is our Light! He shines through the darkness of every sin, known or unknown to man. And He forgives our sin completely, releasing us from its bondage and guilt.

Our Light becomes our SIGHT. And to truly SEE and accept Him assures us of an eternal inheritance!



"The Hills of Bethlehem"

Erin Predmore, collage

## The Twenty-First Day of Advent: The Gift of Hope

Bronwyn White  
December 21, 2024

*John 1:1-5 NIV*

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.*

*Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.*

Hope, in the sense of faith and trust in something good beyond what we can see or know for certain, comes fairly easily to me. Maybe that's a personality thing. Being mellow and easy-going sets you up to generally expect good things. Maybe it's a middle-child thing – wanting to please and make everyone happy, certain that peace is possible despite all evidence to the contrary.

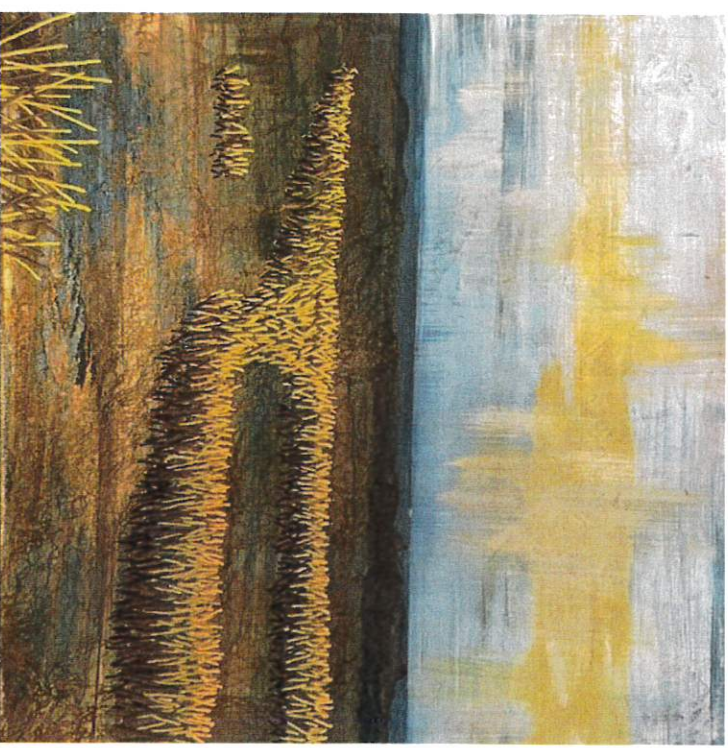
But in thinking about our physical death and eternity, I have struggled to feel hopeful as presumably we as Christians are supposed to do. I have felt more dread and discomfort at the thought and have been unsettled by typical descriptions, biblical and otherwise, of what we can expect after this life on earth. But as God has at various times in my life done for me, He pointed me toward a book that would speak to me in a language I could understand and be reassured. In this case, it was *Till We Have Faces* by C. S. Lewis.

This book is not one of his more well-known books but is described by him as his favorite. It is a retelling of the myth of Cupid and Psyche and is the account of a life, and the ultimate facing of death, that requires wrestling with the inevitable transition from this world to the next. Reading it was the first time I felt positive anticipation for what is to come, without fear and dread, but with comfort and hope.

I quote the novel's protagonist Orual –

The sweetest thing in all my life has been the longing – to reach the Mountain, to find the place where all the beauty came from – my country, the place where I ought to have been born. Do you think it all meant nothing, all the longing? The longing for home? For indeed it now feels not like going, but like going back.

I thought of this book when I lost my partner, David, a little over a year ago. The notion that he has simply gone home and has met the One who created him – that he is finally complete, as was the plan all along – gives me great hope for today and for what is to come.



"Marsh Morning"

Bronwyn White, acrylic, thread & yarn

## The Twenty-Second Day of Advent: The Gift of Room

Dean Sheorn  
December 22, 2024

Luke 2:6-7 NIV

*While they were there (in Bethlehem), the time came for the baby to be born, and she (Mary) gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.*

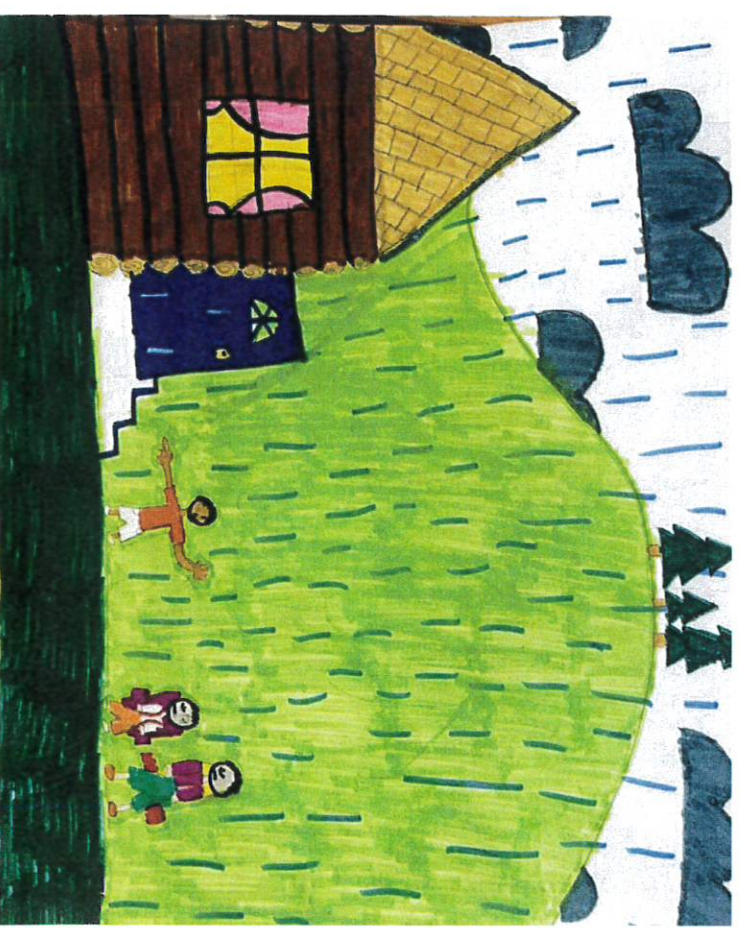
The winter I was thirteen, I encountered hospitality in the most remote and unexpected place. My dad and I were on one of our weekend backpacking trips in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, carrying everything we needed on our backs. The second day of our three-day trip, it rained all day. We had hiked 14 miles in the cold, mostly uphill, to the top of Mt LeConte. We had planned to hike a few more miles down the trail to our campsite but we were both completely exhausted, cold, and wet.

In the rain, we pulled our tent out of our pack and began setting it up on some grass next to a sign that read, "NO CAMPING!" A minute later, we heard someone say, "Hey ... you can't camp here." We looked over to see a ranger who was keeping watch of the buildings on top of the mountain. In the rain, my dad said, "Where would you like for us to go?" I was so tired. I didn't want to walk anymore. I'm sure I had a look of desperation on my face. The ranger thought for a moment, "Y'all want to stay in my cabin?" Without hesitation, we gratefully accepted his offer. We spent the night in a warm, dry bunkhouse on the top of that mountain and had a great conversation with that ranger about our previous adventures in the Smokies. We knew this trip would be at the top of our adventure list going forward.

Mary and Joseph had no place to sleep the night of Jesus' birth. They didn't know she would deliver Jesus that night, rather they

only knew they were weary travelers in dire need of shelter. God places people in our lives in just the right times for different reasons: people that provide everything from a life-changing opportunity to a warm meal, a friendly smile, or room for a night. We don't know if there was really an innkeeper that turned Mary and Joseph away from the inn, but we know there was no room. Someone must have helped direct them to the stable, extending hospitality for the people in need. Though there was "no room" for Mary, Joseph and their newborn, Christ entered our broken world in order to make room in His kingdom for all of us ... all the time.

We all have different abilities to exercise hospitality, so let's all try to be the face of Christ to people in our lives however we can. And remember: there's always room for ALL of us.



"Come In Out of The Rain"

Bailey Sheorn, marker

# The Twenty-Third Day of Advent: The Gift of Love

December 23, 2024

Bailey Sheorn, age 10

John 3:16-17

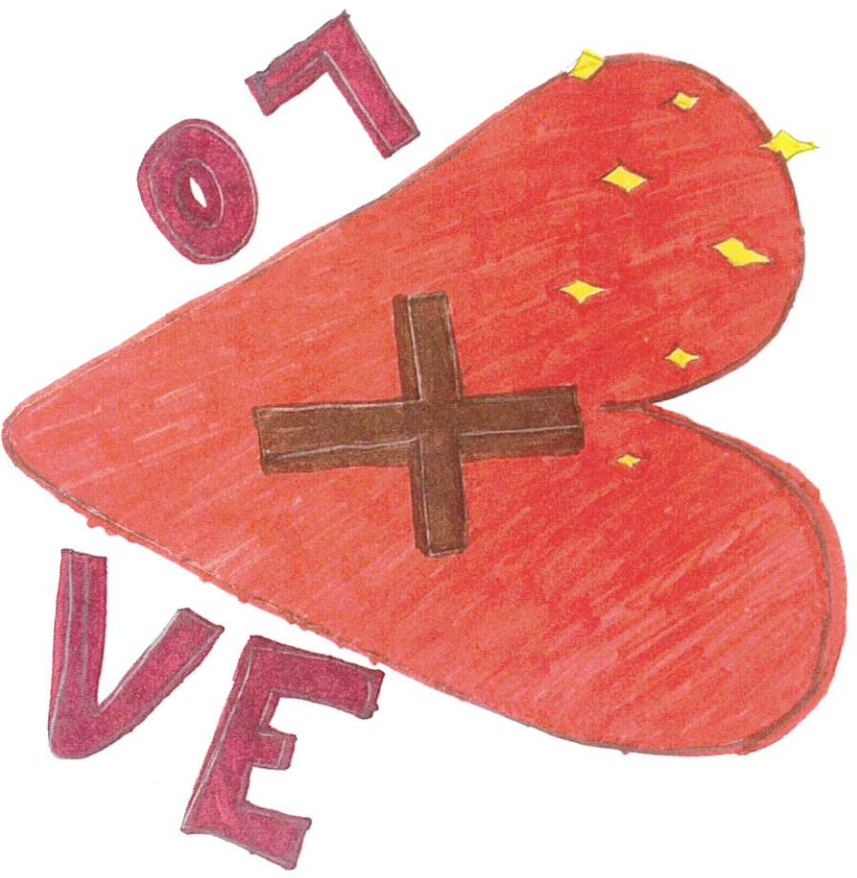
*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. ~John 3:16-17*

I experience love within my family, who teaches me about God's love for me in Jesus Christ. Some things that make me feel loved are hugs and kisses from my family, cards, birthday gifts, playing with my friends, and when someone asks me how I am. What makes you feel loved?

We are told in the Bible that God loves us so much that he sent Jesus to show us how to love and live. This reminds me of a song I learned when I was little.

Jesus loves the little children  
All the children of the world  
Red and yellow, black and white,  
We are precious in God's sight.  
Jesus loves the little children of the world.

So...remember to believe – really believe – that Jesus loves you!



"Love"

Bailey Sheorn, marker

# The Twenty-Fourth Day of Advent: The Gift of Tender Mercy

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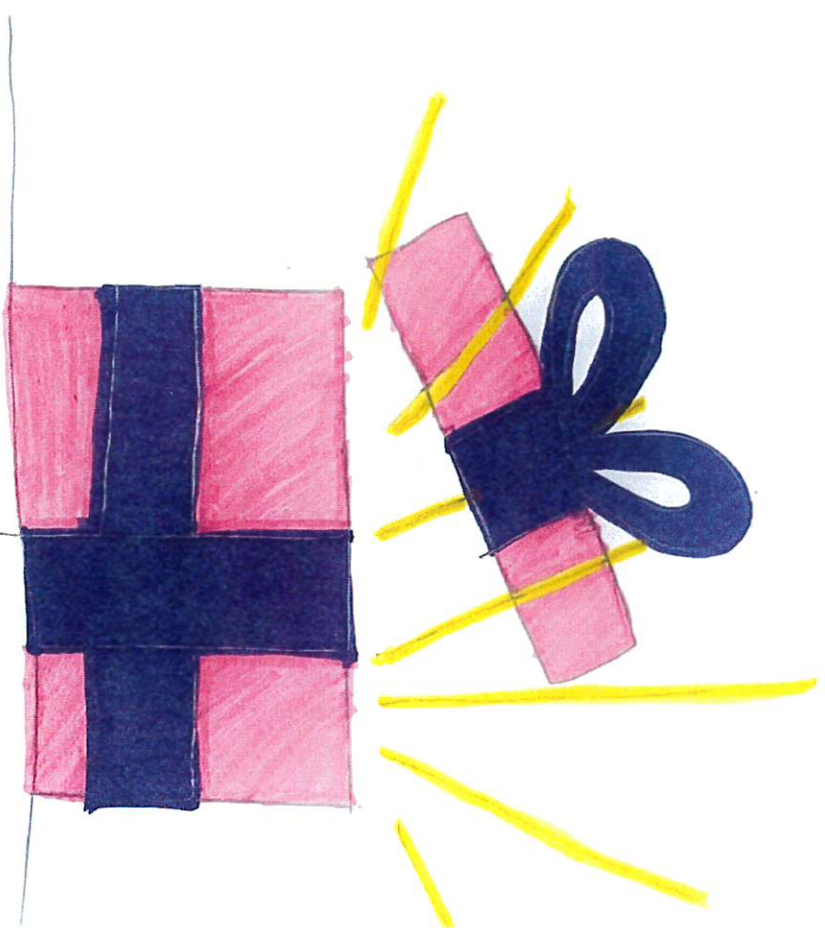
Luke 1:78-79

*By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."*

The gift of mercy is something that none of us can ever earn. It is simply a gift from God, yet most of us struggle to fully receive it. When was the last time you experienced God's mercy? As we conclude the season of Advent, I find myself reflecting on the gift of mercy.

This phrase "tender mercy" describes the type of mercy God gives us. I've gotten in the habit lately of using the word "tender." Such as that exchange between a parent and a child or when someone tears up when talking about something. "Tender" indicates a vulnerability in a touching and moving way. God tenderly and mysteriously gifts us with mercy.

Pope Francis writes, "We need constantly to contemplate the mystery of mercy ... the bridge that connects God and people, opening our hearts to the hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness" (*Misericordiae Vultus*, 2). Mercy comes to each of us in the person of Jesus Christ, who is "the dawn from on high who breaks upon us." Jesus is the one "who gives light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death and who guides our feet into the way of peace." God gifts us with mercy through Jesus thus giving us a deep abiding sense that we are loved by a tender God. Loved before we each were knit in our mothers' wombs. Loved as though held for the first time in our father's arms. Ever loved as a parent loves their child – without precondition, without keeping score, without a response from us. We are loved simply because we are.



"A Gift"

Bailey Sheorn, marker

# Christmas Day

## The Gift of Green Bananas (a story)

Owen Robertson

December 23, 2024

Galatians 4:4

“...when the set time had fully come...” (NIV)

“...When the time arrived that was set by GOD....” (The Message) “...when the time came to completion....” (CSB)

“...when the time was right...” (CEV)

“...when the fullness of time was come....” (KJV)

I bought a bunch of green bananas the other week. They're still as green as the day I bought them. I had hoped they would ripen up. Someone told me to put them in a brown paper bag and stuff them in a dark place for a couple of days. I couldn't bring myself to do it.

My mother's husband came home from the war to be greeted by a son he never conceived. He would have none of me. I had to go. In her distress, my mother thought I might be a blessing to a childless couple she knew. As they drove away in that 46 Buick, I ran after her, clinging to the door and bawling “Momma! Don't leave me!” My words didn't stop them. I didn't know until much later that she was crying too.

Adoption is a mixed bag – a blessing to some and a curse to others. Some kids are loved into new families; some are absorbed into families no one would want. I suppose I was one of the lucky ones. But I felt abandoned – rejected by my own mother and a war hero. Who could possibly love me now?

“Time heals all wounds,” is a crock. Time just makes room for you to suffer through it – stuff your feelings deep down in a dark place where you can try to forget. But you can't. It takes too much time.

I've read those Bible stories where Jesus healed people born lame and they immediately leapt to their feet and started dancing around. That's a miracle in itself. You have to learn to

walk. But if Jesus did it for the lame man, maybe he'd do the same for me. I prayed he'd make me forget right away. But he didn't. I still remember.

Learning to love takes time. Learning to be loved takes longer. Same with forgiveness.

On my seventeenth Christmas, the pastor read from Paul's letter to the Galatians. Not your typical Christmas reading. Maybe that's why I listened.

*But when the fullness of time was come, GOD sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.*

*And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.*

The preacher said, “GOD takes his time. Maybe he has to since he's working with the likes of you and me.”

Then she looked me right in the face and said, “Let me put it another way, “...when the time was ripe, GOD sent His Son. He was born right here among us, just like you were. He was born to an imperfect woman, just like you were. He was born under the weight of the law just like you were. He was born to redeem you and me and all of us who had been kidnapped, shanghaied, chained and bound by the tight conditions of the law.”

I prayed she would stop. I prayed she'd go on. I needed to hear the words – needed to believe. I was so green.

“You have been set free. You didn't set yourself free. GOD did it for you. You are not abandoned. GOD has not forgotten you. Open your eyes and see the truth of who you really are. You are now and always will be a fully adopted child of GOD. The very Spirit of GOD cries out, “Papal Daddy!” on your behalf. GOD cries out to GOD for those who feel forgotten. For those who think they've been abandoned. For those who are stuffed so deep down in a dark space that they feel no one could possibly love them. GOD is your Daddy now. GOD is your

Momma. She will never leave you alone. You are loved beyond imagination."

Tears streamed down my face.

They're streaming down even now.

I've been thinking about what she said those sixty years ago.

Maybe I'll put those green bananas in the brown paper bag after all.

I suppose it's time.

Merry Christmas



"The Bananas"

Rose Linder, acrylic