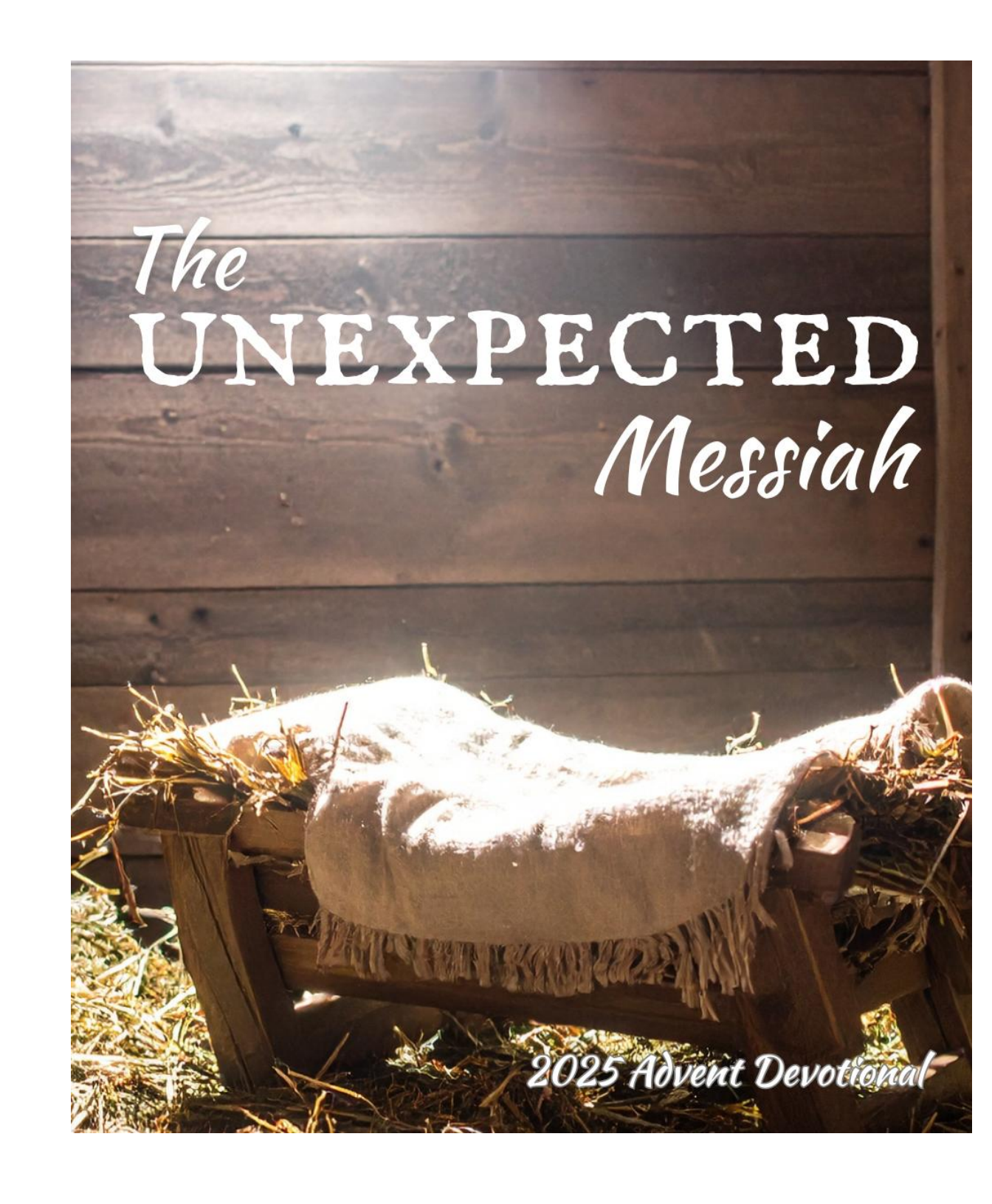


A photograph of a wooden manger, likely a nativity scene prop. The manger is made of dark wood and is filled with straw. A white, fringed cloth is draped over the front of the manger. The background is a dark, textured wooden wall. The lighting is warm and focused on the manger.

The **UNEXPECTED** *Messiah*

2025 Advent Devotional

Introduction

Surprise, it's Christmas!

Not much of a surprise, is it. In fact, that's what these four weeks are for – the Season of Advent is our preparation for Christmas. In the church, it's how we get ready. While department stores and Amazon start chaotically scrambling right after back-to-school shopping is done, and even while Halloween costumes and candy are on sale, we spend exactly four Sundays before Christmas methodically preparing. We gather for worship, light a candle on the wreath, read some verses of scripture, sing some songs and hear a message about hope, joy, peace and love. It's all to put our hearts and minds in the right place so that Christmas can be... all that it's meant to be.

These devotions are part of that. Whether you read them daily throughout Advent, over the course of each weekend or Sunday, or even sitting by the tree in one fell swoop – we hope they will help your heart and mind be open to experience the surprises God has in store for you this Christmas. Because for all of our preparation... there will still be something excited and unexpected for you, for us, when we encounter Jesus anew!

Welcoming You to Grow in Jesus in unexpected ways this Advent,

Pastor Don

Canonsburg UP Hosts Santa at Canonsburg Old-Fashioned Christmas

Friday, December 5 & Saturday, December 6 in Fellowship Hall

Schedule and info at: www.canonsburgsoldfashionedchristmas.com

Advent Potluck Dinner | Sunday, December 7

5:00 PM Potluck Dinner (Bring a Side of Dessert to Share) | 6:00 PM Games

Christmas Laser Spectacular Returns!

Friday, December 19 & Saturday, December 20

Seating is Limited. Advanced Ticket Purchases Strongly Recommended.

Tickets can be purchased online at www.canonsburgup.org or in the church office (Monday-Friday 9:00 AM-3:00 PM). Adults \$15/Children \$7

Christmas Services

Saturday, December 24 | 7:00 PM & 10:00 PM (in person and online)

Sunday, December 28 | 10:00 AM

Services are streamed on YouTube (@canonsburgup) and
Facebook (@CanonsburgUPChurch)

“And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.” – Romans 5:5

Not everything can be easily put to words, or add up like a balance sheet. Some things must be experienced and even in that experience, they defy our explanation. Why do we like one painting and by-pass another? Why does one song strike our heart and another grating to our ears? More than enough ink has been spilled, trying to capture in a clear and concise way what is often no more than a fleeting feeling.

Hope is like that.

It’s more than *a wish our heart desires*. It’s a gift of God – that shines and reflects in different colors and hues as we turn it in our hands to examine it – always a little beyond our ability to pin it down completely.

But what it does to us is unmistakable. It uplifts and empowers, propels our hearts towards goodness and love in ways that we could not achieve on our own.

Emily Dickinson brings this to life in her famous poem, and rather than spill any more ink of my own, trying to describe it, I simply offer it up to you as inspiration, this first weekend of Advent, as we light the Candle of Hope.

*“Hope” is the thing with feathers –
That perches in the soul –
And sings the tune without the words –
And never stops – at all –*

*And sweetest – in the Gale – is heard –
And sore must be the storm –
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm –*

*I’ve heard it in the chilliest land –
And on the strangest Sea –
Yet – never – in Extremity,
It asked a crumb – of me.*

Prayer: God of all hope, who floods my heart and soul beyond what I can even dream of, attune my heart to you this season. Help me to ride the wings of your grace and entrust myself, my loved ones and this world, to your perfect and never-ending care. I long for your Spirit to fill my heart, so that I might know in the depths of my soul, the fullness of your love. I choose today, to put my hope in you. Amen.

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." - John 14:27

As Advent season begins, we tend to reflect on the memories that bring us hope, love, joy and peace at this most special time of the year for Christians. We rejoice and celebrate the miracle of Jesus' birth and recognize its significance in our lives.

I experienced a recent event that can only be described as an unexpected, priceless gift that will carry me throughout the year. My dad passed rather unexpectedly in April 2024.

During my daily prayers, I always ask God to "tell dad that we love and miss him and that he is not forgotten." Occasionally I ask God to send a sign that dad was okay. A couple of weeks ago after praying, I again asked for a sign that dad was okay. Later this very same day when I opened my iPad, I got the best surprise.

In the upper right corner was a "memory"; a picture of my dad sitting in a chair on my porch from 2017! I did not even remember this picture as most of my photos are on my phone and not on the iPad. The other surprising thing was that my dad was in the picture alone, which is unusual as most of the pictures I have of him always had someone with him, usually the grandkids. Needless to say, I smiled and felt an immediate sense of joy, relief, hope and peace. In my mind and heart, I know this was God's way of providing me with comfort when it was needed and also to remind me that God is always with me to provide what I seek.

May you all experience God's comfort, joy, love, hope and peace at Christmas and throughout the new year.

Romans 15:13 *"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."*

Happy Holidays!

Prayer: Dear God, you are my hope. In you, I choose to put my trust. No matter what happens around me, or to me, or to my loved ones, I know that we are safe and secure in your hands. I lay down my burdens and entrust them to you. I take up your peace, recognizing that my hope finds its fullness in you alone. Amen.

Dear friends, let me give you a question to answer. What is it you strive for? Some might have very similar answers, others very different answers to this question, but let me tell you a story first.

I was in my younger years during Christmas, although I don't remember exactly how old I was. It was a year we had my aunt and uncle in town with us, as well as our grandparents all on my Dad's side. I remember being the happiest I had felt in years when it was time for Christmas Day presents. It felt like the perfect day, with all of us gathered together around a tree filled with ornaments and gifts under it. The cinnamon rolls in the oven for breakfast, and the morning light flowing through the window behind us. Then and there, I could've stayed like that for eternity and felt no difference in peace. I was, simply put... happy.

Now...back to the question. I believe, no matter what anybody thinks, they are simply striving towards happiness. If you really think about it, nobody wants to feel sadness in life, or an empty left void in their hearts. Happiness is the summit that all in life want to reach. To reach it would mean your life is complete, right? Some would say yes to this, others would say the opposite.

What I really want to tell you though is if what you strive for is happiness, then why wouldn't anyone else want it as well? What better gift is there than happiness in these times of misconstrued belief and conflicting ideas, these head-butting thoughts that only tear everyone apart further and further. What could be better than a glimpse of what heaven is like through our world, to give someone else the gift of happiness and hope?

To leave you, I give you a challenge, similar to the years before this, and one that I would hope to continue years afterward. Just as Jesus has, spread happiness to the furthest corners of the world, as far as you can see. Any happiness might be what someone needs and it certainly won't hurt anyone, but it will, above all, show love.

Prayer: Dear God, bless our hearts to be open to others. To give gifts resembling the fruits of the Spirit. Rich in love and happiness for your people. Help us to give not out of necessity, but the goodness of our hearts, so that we may feel the same way when we see the look on their faces that resembles everything bright in the world. Be with us this Christmas season as we continue moving forward with your grace and goodness being shared all the way. Amen.

I am going to tell you a story about a little girl born in 1963. In 1961, her parents lost a little girl at 4 weeks old. Then lo and behold came this little girl. She was born with a birth defect, but was still the apple of her daddy's eye. Her daddy worked afternoon shift and would come home and kiss that little baby goodnight even though she was asleep.

As she grew, she found hope that her daddy would bring her a treat from work and every morning she would look in his lunch bucket. Her daddy never noticed her birth defect, but the kids at school sure did. She was called "flat face", "no nose" among other things. At 10, she had a bone taken from her hip and put in her nose.

One of her most cherished memories comes from when her brothers and sister would go to their dad's at Christmas time and she would wait with hope for the special gift from her daddy. One year was a walking doll, nearly as tall as the girl and a hand-painted pink doll cradle made by a family friend.

As she got older it was a desk chair, a green desk lamp and the last Christmas it was a cookbook. She still has the lamp and the cookbook. That little girl anticipated with hope what that gift would be every year.

Yes, that little girl was me.

This year, we are extending hope through our charity to veterans. There will be 22 large bags delivered to the veterans shelter with gifts from us. 22 because that is the number of veterans who commit suicide every day. One nearly every hour.

It is our hope to get this up and running so that we can do more, but it seems that there is an obstacle at every corner.

We will not let them be forgotten. Almost every time we go, tears will fall. They will hug us and be so grateful that we brought them a little bit of hope. I will also remember my brothers and keep trying to create a legacy for them.

Prayer: Dear God, whose arm is not too short to save, nor ear too deaf to hear. God whose mind and heart no one can fathom, yet who does not hold a record of my wrongs. In you I am safe and secure, as are all those who have put their hope in you. I remember before you this day, those who have served and loved, lived and died, may their memory be eternal, just as your love is ever true. Amen.

Beneath the star so pure and bright,
God's promise bloomed that holy night.
A Child was born, so small, so mild,
Yet Heaven's peace lay in that Child.

No royal robe, no golden flame,
Yet angels sang the Savior's name.
The world grew still, the night grew warm,
As Hope took flesh in human form.

The weary hearts, the broken souls,
Found love that heals, restores, and holds.
For in that manger, low and bare,
God's boundless Grace was resting there.

Through every age, through joy and strife,
His love remains, our joy, our life.
So let our hearts, like Bethlehem,
Make room for Christ to dwell in them.

Now light a flame, both small and strong,
Let kindness be your Christmas song.
For every soul, in every place,
Can share this gift of hope and grace.

"We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure." — Hebrews 6:19

Hope doesn't always arrive with fanfare. Sometimes it shows up quietly — in the people who check on us, in the strength we didn't know we had, in the gentle ways God reminds us that we're not walking through life alone.

This Advent season, our family has been learning that hope isn't just wishing things were different. It's trusting that God is steady even when life feels anything but steady. It's believing that He's working in places we cannot see, and carrying us on the days we feel tired, overwhelmed, or unsure.

When we pause long enough, we start to notice the small flickers of His goodness around us — the prayers of friends, the unexpected provisions, and the quiet peace He places in our hearts even when circumstances are heavy.

As we light the Advent candles this season, we remember that Jesus entered a world filled with worry, fear, and uncertainty... and yet He brought a hope that could not be shaken. That same hope is still holding us today.

Prayer: Lord, thank You for being our steady hope. Open our eyes to see Your light even in the dim places of our lives. Help us rest in Your promises and trust the ways You are working, even when we can't see the full picture. Let Your hope guide our words, our choices, and our hearts this Advent season. Amen.

“The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.” – Isaiah 11:6

The most amazing thing happened today. Looking out my office window, into the small wooded area that overlooks the stream that feeds Chartiers Creek, I saw a very large bird, perched on a tree limb. I had to do a double take, because in all my years here, I’ve never seen a bird as large as this, out there.

I’m admittedly, not a birder. I’ve played my fair share of *Wingspan* games, and I’m still not all that knowledgeable about what kind of bird is what. But I’m fairly sure what I was looking at was a juvenile Cooper Hawk. Fairly common to North America... but not so common to ten feet off the ground outside my church office window. And juvenile or not, he was big. As I grabbed my phone to snap his picture, I noticed about ten feet away, a grey squirrel out on another branch. I switched over to video, as I was certain I was about to watch this hawk go get it’s dinner. I hit record, just as he took flight in the direction of the squirrel... or so I thought.

In the blink of an eye, it was the squirrel that re-emerged on that branch where the hawk had been, and the hawk flew away. The hawk hadn’t gone after the squirrel, it had been scared away by it!

The scriptures give us some surprising images, like a wolf and lamb or a leopard and goat or a lion and calf lying down together – all led by a *child*. Those kinds of things just don’t happen in the world we live in. It’s “*dog-eat-dog*” not, “*lions-napping-with-lambs*” right? Or maybe, it doesn’t have to be. Maybe, when we’re led by the *Christmas child*, we can *actually* experience the kind of peace that God promised way back when. Maybe it just might be available to us today. Maybe, God wants to surprise us with a moment, a lifetime, and *eternity* of peace that will knock our socks off. Here’s hoping it’s more than a dream!

Prayer: God, you promised a peace that surpasses understanding – and that has to be right. Because the peace that I see and so often experience in this world, is fleeting at best. It seems to evaporate in a moment. But I long for it, and I beg you to fill me – my heart, mind and body – my home, my neighborhood, this world, with your surprising and amazing peace. Amen.

When people think of Christmas, they think of gifts, family, and the birth of Jesus. But in reality, before the hype, before the service, and before the celebration, there is so much stress and anxiety. When trying to get gifts, decorating the house, and even making plans for traveling to see family.

It's funny even when everyone is relaxing and trying to enjoy a peaceful holiday season, stress somehow always sneaks its way through. It's lurking, ready to strike at any time. And that's not how anyone should live their life.

Stress is like a heavy weight on everyone's shoulders. However, no one can see how much you are carrying with you, which means no one can truly feel the stress you feel during Christmas or in general.

John 14:27 says "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." I think it means that Jesus and God give their peace to the people of the world in hopes that everyone has a peaceful life. It also says that the world doesn't give like how he gives which I think is basically saying the world gives stress with real-world problems while God gives peace to deal with those problems or have a break from dealing with them.

So not only should people live without stress with normal life and around the holidays, but we shouldn't take for granted the peace that God gives us in stressful and hard times. Which is exactly why God sent us Jesus, to be the peace and light we didn't know we needed in life.

Sometimes the gifts you don't ask for turn out to be the best, kindest, sweetest, and most thoughtful.

A number of years ago, my husband Dave was in the hospital. Although the boys helped as they could, there were many tasks that they were not expected to do. One was managing mouse traps. None of them would do that task and I didn't expect them to. That had been Dave's job all along - man of the house and all that. With him in the hospital, that left me. I could set them without too much trouble, but once a critter was caught, I wouldn't touch it. I just went out the basement door and threw the trap and mouse over the fence toward the highway (we overlook I-79).

It was getting close to Christmas and it was clear that he would not be home to celebrate with us. At that time, children were not allowed to visit. When I was in for visits, we planned out what we thought I should get for our three boys to find under our tree. We didn't plan gifts for each other and would do that once he was home.

I was running a preschool with my friend, Lynn, at that time. I shared some of the adaptations Dave and I were making for the holidays so that they would still be special for the boys. She was my outlet for sharing the bumps in the road as I dealt with the boys' needs while running back and forth to Pittsburgh to keep Dave's spirits up and keep me current with his progress. The boys and I agreed that the most practical gift for Dave was a nice warm bathrobe, as the hospital versions were not very warm. My Christmas wish was that he would get home soon. (We were all getting cranky with the separation.) Little did I know that Dave was also in touch with Lynn to arrange a Christmas present for me.

As the holiday arrived, I brought in Dave's gift from me and artwork and notes from the boys. To my surprise, he pulled out a lovely gift bag and handed it to me. I had no idea how he arranged to get a gift and couldn't guess what it could be. Imagine my surprise when I pulled out the tissue paper to find a bag full of mouse traps!!! It was the funniest, strangest, and most loving gift I have ever received. Each Christmas, we would laugh at the memory.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, through the Advent season, the laughter of children echoes in my ears – from my childhood up through the ages. I rejoice in these memories and in you who have allowed for these moments to blossom and burst forth. I receive these gifts anew today, with thanksgiving and praise for you, the Giver of every good gift, including this gift of laughter. Amen.

"And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." - Philippians 4:7

Something happened that night. It's still hard to put into words.

It was 2005 and our church was having quarterly services for healing prayer. Introduced and led by Pastor Linda Mankey, they were opportunities for the church and community to gather together in an intimate environment and receive God. Members of the Prayer Team were on hand to offer individual prayer, as well as anointing with oil, many people experienced the healing of mind, body, and spirit over the course of these services.

At this particular service, a lifetime of worshipping God, serving in the church and trying to follow Jesus came to a head. *I learned that I wasn't alone.* Surrounded by other believers and surrounded, upheld, and supported by Jesus. Not just the Jesus *out there*, but the Jesus *in here*.

I hadn't really grown up with the idea of having a *personal relationship* with Jesus until I came to Canonsburg UP Church nearly a decade before. But on that night, it made sense.

And as I left the service, Pastor Mankey looked straight at me and said, *"God isn't done with you yet."* Sure enough, God is not. With a deep sense of God's love and peace, I've been able to step into various roles over the years to extend that love and peace throughout our church and community. And without that assurance, I don't know where I would be.

Awhile later, my sister was going to Arizona to visit our three brothers out there. I asked her to tell John, one of the most faithful people I know, *"I get it"*. He knew exactly what I meant.

This is the prayer I wrote to Jesus that night:

Jesus, Thank you from my heart and soul. You are the only reason I have peace in my soul. You are the only reason I can pray for forgiveness. Thank you that I know through you I have the hope for life eternal – by God's grace. I'm so happy that when I was seeking, you found me, a lost sheep. I'm overwhelmed you are in my life.

I'm not familiar with Perry Como's musical library. I admit that, with some hesitation, given I drive by a statue of him on my way to church. I do, however, know his Christmas albums from the 1960s because they are a family Christmas tradition. They don't go out of style. The world changes each year, but there is an aspect of timelessness in those Christmas songs. I heard them at my grandma's house, my parent's house, and now my own. They are an expected part of the Christmas season. I find this season is predominately filled with these heartfelt, expected traditions.

An unexpected source of joy and peace came to me through my kids as I saw them experience my traditions for the first time. While I've come to realize they'll never have the same affinity for the 1980s "California Raisins Claymation Christmas Celebration" or "A Muppet Family Christmas" as I do, joy and peace can come from the extension of Christmas traditions to another generation. The story of the birth of Jesus, whether told by Peanuts or the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, is the ultimate tradition. A story so beautiful that I thought it had given me everything it could, until I saw the seed germinate in the next generation – belief in "the one who is, and who was, and who is to come. The Almighty." Let us revel in the expected this Christmas season, while celebrating the unexpected.

December 12

Joyel

Tiffany Slanker

"Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls." - 1 Peter 1:8-9

Growing up, I had an older brother and sister, so I was the "baby". My dad and brother shared the same middle name, and my mom and sister shared the same middle name. I felt a little left out and often dreamt one day I'd have a little girl to share my middle name with too.

On this day, fourteen years ago, I was blessed with my little girl! I was so thrilled to share her name with the world. It seems like such a minor detail to most, but I took great pride in passing it onto her. I often didn't feel like it fit me all the time but I'm sure my mom felt differently. However, it certainly fits my daughter perfectly, almost made for her.

At this point, you are probably wondering what it is! My mom created it from Joy and Love. Joyel (pronounced Joy-L). During this advent season, I hope you take time to share the joy and love that this season brings with others.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we are filled with joy as we remember the gift of you son, Jesus, a sign of your immense love for us. Help us to walk in that love, preparing our hearts to share it with others. May your love empower us to serve one another and bring joy to a world that desperately needs it. Amen.

“As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.”
– Luke 1:44

I’ve never had a child *in* my body. I can’t quite comprehend the *feeling* of a baby moving inside me. That must be so wild. Even the best descriptions – those that came from Bridgette or others, don’t quite convey the full experience.

Going one step beyond though, when Mary shows up to her cousin Elizabeth’s, there is a meeting of two soon-to-be-moms. And Elizabeth tells Mary that her baby, the one-day *John-the-Baptist*, leaped for joy at the encounter. That’s wild.

So often, as Christians, we parse out what’s actually joy. What really counts as that sustaining, counter-cultural, deeper-than-mere-happiness experience, and what’s just a fleeting fancy. Half the time, honestly, I can’t tell the difference. In fact, I bet if I tried to give my definition, I’d probably have someone try and correct me.

And then I look at this little encounter of two unborn babies – and the mom who hasn’t actually *seen* either one, tells us all to sit down and simply listen – ***here’s joy!***

What did that feel like? She doesn’t try to describe it, she just tells us, ***it was joy.*** Did he fully understand? Unlikely, he’s never even breathed on his own, let alone done the work to discern what’s a momentary happiness and what’s deep-seeded joy. But it was, ***joy.*** And here’s what I’ll try to say about it – it was joy... because John, and Elizabeth, were encountering ***Jesus!*** And Jesus is the absolute embodiment of joy. And even an unborn baby recognized and experienced that. So maybe... if I’m going to truly experience joy, maybe I might need to be a little bit more like a little, helpless baby myself.

Prayer: Lord, through the words of Bach, I pray - Jesus, joy of man’s desiring, Holy wisdom, love most bright, drawn by Thee, our souls aspiring, soar to uncreated light. Through the way where hope is guiding, hark, what peaceful music rings, where the flock in Thee confiding, drink of joy from deathless springs. Amen.

I took a walk this morning
I had to go and see
The world of white that winter's hands,
Had fashioned just for me.

Alone beneath the somber skies,
I felt the silent spell,
And I beheld a fairyland,
As feathered snowflakes fell.

Across a little wooden bridge,
My footsteps in the snow,
Left little tracks which clearly told
Which way I meant to go.

With eyes alight and cheeks aflame,
I climbed the nearest hill
And on the threshold of such joy
My heart grew hushed and still.

The glistening white cathedral,
Of the forest towards high,
And I, a humble worshipper,
Sensed God was passing by.

I do not know what happened,
But I am not the same,
And I went home a better soul
Than when I came!

As I reflect on the joy, peace and hope of Christmas, the cornerstone has always been the Christmas tree for me. Every year of my life, we have had a live Christmas tree. I joke with my sons that I will always have a live tree for as long as I live!

I have such wonderful memories of going on an adventure to pick out and cut down "our" tree. For several years, we went into the woods and cut it down. I can vividly remember the excitement it brought to all of us. Over the years, one of my best memories is the year we cut down a tree that was too tall to fit in our living room. We didn't use anything to measure the size of the tree in the woods. So, we had no idea how tall it was until we got it home. We all stood around wondering what to do... and decided to cut a piece off the top of our tree. Yes, you heard me... off the top of the tree! We had to lay the star on the front since there wasn't a top branch for it to sit on. We just shook our heads and laughed at it. I will carry that unexpected and joyous surprise with me for the rest of my life. These days, we go to the tree farm and pick "our" special tree with our grandson, Niko shouting out which ones he likes. There is that joy and wonder on his face just as I remember it from myself and my boys through the years. Those moments actually seem to transport me back in time.

Once we get the tree home, we shake it out, get it in the stand and just inhale the wonderful pine smell that fills the air. I can barely wait to let it fall before I start to put the beautiful lights on it. Those colored lights remind me of God's light. It's always there in the darkness no matter what life throws at us. It is a beacon leading us to the peace and strength of our Savior. Those lights on the tree give me peace as I sit and stare at them.

The ornaments come next. We have collected so many through the years. They are all different and unique but they work perfectly and beautifully together on that tree. Those ornaments remind me of the amazing way that God created each of us to be unique and different but to come together and serve as one body of Christ. I cannot tell you the incredible joy looking at that collection of ornaments brings me year after year! Many are handmade creations that have been passed down through the years, and they are more precious to me than just about anything. I believe that's how God thinks about us. We are the most precious creation he has ever made.

Finally, it is time for the Star! We try to rotate who puts the Star on the tree each year. Niko is even standing on the couch now to try and balance to reach the top of the tree. I look at the star and think about the journey that the wisemen made to visit baby Jesus in the manger. That star guides and leads all of us to Jesus if we choose to follow it.

When the tree is all finished and it is quiet, that's my most favorite time of all. I love to turn off the lights in the room and just sit and stare at the beautiful creation before me. Those are the most beautiful, peaceful and joyous times of the Christmas season for me. The tree, every year, is like unwrapping the best surprise I have ever received. It fills me with such happiness and love. This Christmas season, I would encourage each of you to take a few extra minutes to enjoy the beauty and simplicity of the Christmas tree. I hope it can bring a smile to your face and fill your heart with a little extra joy this year.

About 13 years ago, my family decided to move our traditional Christmas gift exchange and dinner to a rental hall. Because my family had grown from 10 people or so (grandparents, adult children/spouses and a few grandchildren) to over 20 people, including great-grandchildren - it was decided that instead of trying to cramp everyone into a small living-room and kitchen, we'd take the celebration “on the road” to a nearby hall that included plenty of space and a huge kitchen.

The hall had everything we needed for a family holiday get together: the younger ones could run and play without having to worry about breaking any “family heirlooms.” There were more tables and chairs than we needed (and they all matched). The industrial kitchen had plenty of space for heating our meal, washing dishes, and preparing last-minute casseroles. Parking was plentiful and we didn't have to worry about blocking someone's driveway. It didn't resemble a Norman Rockwell painting, but it fit.

All we needed was to take our traditions with us. After a little planning of the menu and who was bringing what, we entered the hall with covered dishes, wrapped gifts, disposable plates/utensils and smiles on our faces because we knew this would be so much easier. My elderly father (who wasn't in good health) even setup a small portion of his HO-scale train set that we had as a tradition in our home many years.

We turned that industrial, steely kitchen into a headquarters for a homemade meal with all of the smells that memories were made of. The cold linoleum floor was camouflaged by kids running around and my dad's train set. Beige tables were unrecognizable as they were covered with Christmas tablecloths and colorful gifts of all sizes. The echo of the empty hall suddenly filled with laughter and giggles.

Before we knew it, everyone was eating delicious food, unwrapping gifts, retelling stories and playing games – just like it was at my parents' house all of those years. Our joy was that it didn't matter where Christmas was celebrated: a cramped house, in an apartment, a hotel, an airport, or even in a rental hall. The people we love were all together, celebrating the birth of Jesus, who was born in a much more humble home.

Prayer: Oh Spirit of Joy, that fills my heart and home and everywhere I step, I praise your perfect and always-accessible presence. Thank you for finding me, over and over again, in the middle of every mess, along every highway and byway, beneath every load, and in this very moment. I choose to receive your gift of joy today. Amen.

Moving is always an arduous, stressful, chaotic time – even when you're moving to an exciting new place, with an exciting new job, and meeting exciting new people. Such was the case in July of 2014, when our family moved to PA.

At the time, Bria was 3, Aidan was 5, and Brennan was 8. Plus we had our cat Snickers – a half-Siamese/half-puma (at least that was our running theory) that was our first "baby." Snickers was the kitten I picked out when we were living in Los Angeles. His antics made us laugh, and he was snuggly and playful. In 2004, he made the cross-country trip with us to NJ for seminary, forgoing his crate to sleep soundly in the sun on the dashboard of our U-Haul...or on my lap...or on Don's lap while he was driving.

He again moved with us to OH, where he stood watch over each of our babies when they were born - snoozing next to them whenever he could, but also playing with their toys and believing the vibrating bouncy seat was his personal throne. He was also super-mischievous, and try as we might, never broke his bad habits of scratching furniture, getting on the table, or biting too hard (*someone* played a little too rowdy with him as a kitten, I think).

By the time, we moved to PA, Snickers was a veteran at the moving business. However, not long after we moved into our rental home, we noticed a swift decline in his health. Just 3 short months after being here, I gently stroked his fur as he passed away at the vet's office. That was so difficult. I was still adjusting to life here and so losing Snickers was a gut punch.

In June 2015, we finally got to move into our house. But it wasn't the same without Snickers to me, and Don knew my and the kids' hearts were really missing a furry friend in our midst. A year later, we felt settled. We'd talked about getting a cat again, but nothing came of it...until Christmas of 2016.

A few days before Christmas, Don came home with a giant box. I thought, "Oh boy, he just got the biggest Lego set ever!" He quickly brought it up to our room. Unfortunately, I was really sick with a head cold that day, so while I was curious, I also just wanted to crawl into my bed. I followed him up and promptly plopped myself down for a small snooze. I asked Don what he brought up, and to my utter surprise, next thing I know a small little fluff ball was next to me.

Don surprised us all with a new kitten for Christmas. We kept Trooper, our sweet Snowshoe, up in our room for a day and a half until – like a Disney movie come to life - we put him in a little box and had the kids open it Christmas morning. We had all the feels that morning as we welcomed our new little family member. An unexpected and joy-filled surprise is always a welcome event, and at Christmastime, it feels even more magical. I thank God for those special moments that remind us of the wonder of who he is and how he loves us.

T'was the night before Christmas, far from the town
The shepherds were watching; the sheep had lain down.

When all of a sudden there shone a great light.
The shepherds were cowed; the sheep they took fright.

The poor men they quaked, they knew not what to do,
As an Angel appeared and spoke to them too.

"Glad tidings" it said, "you must haste to the town"
They packed up their gear, and the hill they ran down.

A bright star they followed to a stable so cold
Where a small babe was found as the angel foretold.

They fell on their knees and gave thanks for the child,
His beautiful face and his nature so mild.

And I wonder right now if they knew what it meant
For the boy that they met was from Heaven sent,

To rescue all sinners both then and today,
Did he look like our hero asleep in that hay?

"Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God." – 1 John 4:7

Late last summer, prompted by some quiet time with God and reflecting on what God has been doing in my life over the past several years, I put pencil to paper and crafted this poem. As I looked back at it, it seemed like an offering that would fit this year's Advent Devotional. May you too, recognize God's amazing love and be filled this season with an overwhelming sense of it, for you.

Prompted by Love

Across the room I trod, to meet the one I fear
"Fancy meeting you," I say, "of all the places, here."
An encounter etched in time, a chance, a risk embarked
Now face-to-face, unmasked and scared, I fumble with my heart.

Bold I approached the throne, I thought, but courage faded fast.
For what looked back at me, through rosy lens, or so it seemed,
Held my gaze steadfast.

"I've been watching you awhile." Spoke the voice in steady pace.
"Hoping you would find the nerve, to join me in this space.
Let down your guard, take up my hand, the dancing has begun.
You say you came, to see the world, let go, and have some fun."

"But truly, you are here because, I called, and sang a lullaby.
For years and years, it rang and echoed, all across the sky."

"And patiently I waited here, for you to join the song.
To enter in, this joyous place, to cross the sacred pond."

"So here we are, hands bound at last
Hearts beating just as one.
I trusted you, you proved me true,
Look what love has done."

Prayer: Dear God, I take this moment to simply breathe in your love for me. I believe you love me, and I open my heart to receive your love in any and every way that you would share it with me. And as this Advent season culminates in the craziness of Christmas, I choose to rest in your love for me. Amen.

"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." - Matthew 11:28

It was the first Friday in December 1996. We lived in Munhall, Pa and attended the Whitaker United Methodist Church and we were getting ready for Christmas. I worked full time and was taking night and weekend classes to achieve my accounting degree.

My husband had stayed home from work that day because he seemed to have bad cold and slight fever. He actually called our family doctor and was told he had a sinus infection and prescribed an antibiotic. Our children were in 1st and 3rd grade and I went to work that day. When I got home from work, the kids were in the living room watching TV and I asked *"where is your dad?"*. They pointed to our bedroom.

I went in and Rich was burning up. He had a 104 temperature and was shivering. He said he took his antibiotic, but did not know if he should take Motrin or Tylenol. I had an 800 mg Motrin and I gave him one. Well, what happened next was a blur.

I went to check on the kids and I heard a loud sound. Ran back into the bedroom, my husband was having a seizure. I figured it was because of the high fever. I told my son to run next door and get our neighbor and I called 911. Our neighbor took the kids to her house and the paramedics came. The seizure ended, but my husband was not responding. Rich came too and said he was fine, but paramedics knew he was not. On the way to the local hospital, he had another seizure and a third in the emergency room. My parents met me at the hospital. Because Rich was not responding, the next thing I knew we were back in the ambulance and on our way to Presbyterian hospital in Oakland to Neurology ICU.

After many tests and a lot of waiting, they decided Rich had herpes encephalitis of the brain. The next 48 hours would be critical. It was now 11 o'clock and in walks my pastor. I burst into tears and he just held me and prayed. At two o'clock in the morning, the nurse told me to go home and get some rest because they had sedated Rich so he would sleep.

I went home and my parents came to my house to take care of the kids so I would get up early to go back to the hospital. When I arrived, Rich was stable and for two days I just sat and watched and talked to the doctors. By day 3, Rich was coming around and the doctors said he was improving. Day 4 he was moved into a regular room on the Neurology floor and the antibiotic mix they had him on was working. By Day 5, they were sending him home with a port in his arm for me to give him intravenous medicine 3 times a day. The medicine took 1 hour to dispense. I brought Rich home and had visiting nurses and technicians revolving through my house. In the meantime, I was trying to do everything as normal as possible for my children. I oversaw the Christmas program at church. We were doing the "Best Present of All" by the Donut Man. Everyone at the church pitched in to help with the Christmas program and help us at home. Between working, taking care of Rich and doing the program, I was stressed. I just kept praying, knowing God answers prayers. Rich was getting better but he did not remember being in the hospital at all.

The night of the Christmas Program, Rich was able to come to the church and see the kids. The program went off without one mistake... the kids were amazing! I knew God was present. After the last song, we always had a surprise for the kids...Santa Claus came.

I stood up to announce the special friend that was coming. As I turned around, the man that was to be Santa Claus was standing at the back of the church in his work clothes? I was not sure what to do. All of a sudden, I heard this deep "*Ho Ho Ho*", in came the best Santa Claus I ever saw. The children and I were all frozen. He came down the aisle and came straight to me and took me in his arm and hugged me and I cried in Santa arms. This Santa was sent by God and all my burdens lifted. The rest of the Christmas season was a joyful one.

December 23

"Heaven's Happy Surprise"

Dick Hultman

The night was still, the stars were high,

No one guessed what drew so nigh -

A baby's cry, so soft, so small,

Would bring God's joy and peace to all.

No trumpets loud, no kingly pride,

Just shepherds called to come inside.

Their hearts amazed, their eyes so wide,

The Lord of Heaven, there they spied!

The wisest men from lands afar,

Followed hope beneath a star.

They found not power, wealth, or fame,

But Love wrapped in a humble name.

How quietly God's wonders start,

How softly He transforms the heart.

For Christmas shows in sweet disguise,

The world was blessed with **Heaven's surprise!**

So open wide your heart today,

For blessings come in humble ways.

The greatest gift the world could see -

Is Christ, God's joy, for you and me.

Created with AI assistance of Chat GPT

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." - John 1:5

If you drive past my parents' house in the middle of summer, you probably wouldn't notice anything special about the tall green vines growing along the front of their home. They return year after year - climbing upward, tangled and quiet, with no flowers to show for themselves during the day. They won't compete with bright petunias or bold marigolds. They simply wait.

My mom waits too. She waters and tends them with a kind of patience that borders on faith. Moonflowers never rush to bloom. They save their beauty for the darkness. Every evening, after the sun slips away and most flowers have closed for the night, moonflowers begin their slow unfurling. Long, white petals open like glowing lanterns - soft, radiant, almost secret. They bloom when many people have already turned in for the night. You have to choose to look for them.

At the end of the season, my mom collects the seed pods - carefully dried, split open, and portioned into little packs. She gives them to neighbors, friends, and every year she makes enough packs to give to each of my students. I've done this for several years now, and delight in receiving photos from families: moonflowers blooming on porches, along fences, by backyard sheds. A flower they'd never heard of, planted by a child, blooming at night where they never expected beauty.

This reminds me of how Christ comes into the world. Not loudly. He does not arrive with spotlights, parades, or a burst of fanfare that forces us to pay attention. Jesus comes the way moonflowers bloom - quietly, slowly, and in hours when most people aren't necessarily looking. He unfolds in the dark, not to impress us, but to meet us where we actually are.

The Messiah blooms in places we rarely think to search:

*in homes weighed down by silence,
in hearts that ache for healing,
in lives stretched thin by waiting.*

He grows where loneliness lingers and where grief has settled into the corners. He takes root in our disappointments, our unanswered prayers, our longing for things to be better than they are. Christ does not wait for our world to be bright enough for Him - He steps into the shadows with us.

And when He blooms, it is not always with spectacle. Hope doesn't burst through like fireworks; it appears like a petal opening in moonlight - slow, surprising, and impossible to miss once you've seen it. Peace is not a thunderclap, but a presence that sits beside us in the quiet. Joy glows small but unmistakable, like a pale white flower radiant against the night sky. Love does not insist on being noticed; it reveals itself to the ones willing to slow down and witness it. This Advent, may we not rush the quiet work of God. May we not fear the darkness, but learn to linger in it - trusting that something beautiful is opening even now. Something worth waiting for. Something worth watching for.

In Bethlehem beneath the sky
A humble star was shining high

The heavens sang, the angels cried
"For unto you, the Lord's supplied!"

A manger cradled Heaven's grace
The Savior's love in time and space

No royal robe, no golden crown
Yet glory wrapped the stable round

The shepherds came with hearts astir
To see the gift God gave to earth

The king was born, the world reborn
On that first blessed Christmas morn

So lift your voice, let praises soar
For Christ is King forevermore

Rejoice with heaven's mighty throng
Salvation's gift, our endless song

A Christmas Prayer - Robert Louis Stevenson

Loving Father, Help us remember the birth of Jesus, that we may share in the song of the angels, the gladness of the shepherds, and worship of the wise men. Close the door of hate and open the door of love all over the world. Let kindness come with every gift and good desires with every greeting. Deliver us from evil by the blessing which Christ brings, and teach us to be merry with clear hearts. May the Christmas morning make us happy to be thy children, and Christmas evening bring us to our beds with grateful thoughts, forgiving and forgiven, for Jesus' sake. Amen.