
HOMEMADE
Christmas
2026 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL
(Written by You!)



Dear Friends,

To quote *Dr Seuss's Grinch* – "*Maybe Christmas doesn't come from a store... Maybe Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more."* While we know this to be true, we still find ourselves getting caught up in the tinsel, the trimmings, the trappings – the boxes and bags. We get caught up in the commercial hoopla from Hallmark all the way down to our very own *Old Fashioned Christmas.*

They *can* make Christmas special – they can make it *a lot* – and in that, we can sometimes get ourselves so exhausted, so overwhelmed, that we miss the mark, we miss the entire plot. This year, and especially with these Advent Devotions, we're trying to look at a *Homemade Christmas*.

It reminds me of the story behind *Silent Night, Holy Night* – maybe you already know it. In 1818, Father Joseph Mohr, was preparing for the midnight Christmas Eve service in the newly constructed Church of St. Nicholas in Oberndorf, near Salzburg. The grandness of the service was in real jeopardy, because the church organ was broken. All the planned music for worship was ruined.

So, he asked Franz Gruber, the organist, to compile a simple tune and accompanied on guitar, of all instruments, *"Silent Night"* was born. It wasn't a grand performance, it didn't light the night on fire, it didn't send worshippers home with ringing in their ears – but it has reverberated across the world for over a century. It's become the quintessential Christmas Carol, especially for Christmas Eve. A song that was made at the last minute, with the instrument just lying around, at home – and by its continued singing, helps us all to feel *at home* in the very place Jesus made *his* home, two thousand years ago.

I pray these devotionals, lovingly written and collected by our Church Family, will help you find your home in Christ this Advent Season, preparing you to sing and celebrate anew at 7p and 10p on Christmas Eve as we welcome *Jesus, Lord at Thy Birth!*

Welcoming You to Grow in Jesus,

Pastor Don

In 1999, on the eve of the New Millenia, amid the fear of Y2K and all it might usher in, I was overwhelmed by a very different emotion. *Hope*. Two days before the world might end because our outdated computers only had 2 digits for dates, I stood on Seal Beach at sunset, with a ring in my pocket, envisioning a future with the love of my life.

I had planned so much – the ring, the venue, the time, the ask of her parents – but asking *her*… as I stood there, I realized, I hadn't really *planned* that part. As I looked around, there wasn't much to work with. So decided I'd scribble "*Will You Marry Me"* in the sand.

Halfway through, as she looked away, a wave came by and washed away the message. Quickly beginning again, hoping to finish before she saw me, I knelt down and got it all completed – except for the "?" – I didn't even notice what was missing until seeing the grainy insta-camera photos developed at the local drugstore days later.

But hope is like that, isn't it? It's impossible to weigh all the variables, plan out all the possibilities – you have to proceed as if things *will* work out, even if you can't be certain. Hope isn't wishful thinking, its acting on what you have, what you know, in the moment, and trusting that God will see it through.

27 years ago, I didn't have a fully developed understanding of marriage or family – but I *hoped* that with Bridgette, we would experience something beautiful together. We did, hope *together*, to have children, to raise a family that could reflect the love of God in a way that was a step better than the… *chaotic* homes we'd experienced. But we didn't *know*. We only *hoped.*

Along the way, we've made multiple homes in California, New Jersey, Ohio and Pennsylvania, where we've *hoped* that love of God was experienced – not just by us, but by our children and many others. Like that proposal, we worked with what we had in the moment, sometimes a lot less than we imagined, but through Jesus, that *hope* has been made real, over and over again.

May you too, experience hope made real, this Advent Season, as we journey together!

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.*

As soon as I hear the phrase "Homemade Christmas", I immediately think of my grandma. Every year for the past few years, my gram gives all the grandkids something in four categories of gifts: something you want, something you need, something to wear and something to read.

In addition to that, she makes a personalized gift with dollar bills. For example, one year she made me a wreath that decorated with differing quantities of money. Another year, she made a money tree out of dollar bills. She has also made an origami dress for my sister, a flower vase, and pinwheels folded out of dollar bills.

Each year, I look forward to what creative ideas she'll come up with for the upcoming Christmas, and I honestly believe my grandma has a lot of fun creating these.

Not only that, but my gram will also make each grandchild a homemade ornament every year. My favorite ones include a snow globe and a reindeer made from wine bottle corks! She's so creative when it comes to Christmas presents and it brings me so much joy to know how much love and thought she puts into making these gifts.

Reminiscing on homemade gifts makes me think about the greatest gift of all in Jesus and I am especially grateful for Him during this time of year that we get to celebrate His birth.

Prayer: *God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, of Sarah, Hagar and Rebekah - God of our ancestors known and unknown, we thank you for the long heritage of faith that guides us to this season and propels us along. We thank you for their sacrifices and their service, their love and their grace and we long for the day when we will be reunited together in the fullness of your Kingdom, when we will gaze upon your glory, filled with joy through eternity. May we wade into these waters today. Amen.*

In the Amos family, Christmas has always been about more than what is under the tree. One of our favorite traditions when our kids were little was a homemade stocking stuffer exchange, where each household was tasked with making a small gift for every member of our extended family, including parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. My mom and grandma even made personalized Christmas stockings for every single family member the first year to hold all of these treasures, thoughtfully designed to reflect our individual personalities. Mike's stocking, for example, had a baseball theme. We were blessed to both give and receive so many creative and thoughtful gifts over the years, ranging from homemade tasty treats like rock candy, trail mix, cookies, and hot drink mixes to decorations and keepsakes such as Christmas ornaments, coasters, window clings, keychains, and bookmarks, many of which captured a handprint or photo of the children from the youngest generation. Each gift was a little expression of love, made with the recipients in mind. While many of these gifts brought joy in the moment, one in particular has become a treasured part of our Christmas tradition year after year: our Advent log.

When I was younger (Corinne), I remember making different stocking stuffers each year for the members of our family. It was one of my favorite Christmas traditions. The one that sticks with me the most, however, is when we made Advent logs. I remember my Mom bringing logs to my great grandpa where they cut and drilled holes in them together. My favorite part though was hand-dipping the candles on our back deck. We had never done anything like it before, so I thought it was an amazing craft and fun activity. Since our immediate and extended family uses these Advent logs every Christmas season, it is a gift that just keeps on giving. Not only was the making of this gift an experience I will never forget, but the meaning behind it was just as important. Advent logs are meant to celebrate Jesus by joyously counting down to his birthday. In addition to being a reminder of happy family memories, it is, more importantly, a reminder of the true reason for the season.

Prayer: *Giver of every good and perfect gift, we thank you for the unique ways you present yourself to us this season. We thank you for nurturing faith in each of us, our own mixture of passions, gifting and abilities - how you know us all so well. May we find ourselves within the grip of your grace this season, as we give and receive from you and each other. Amen.*

One of my favorite parts of the Christmas season is the opportunity to give and receive gifts. I have been around for 18 years now and have been blessed in receiving lots of gifts. Some of my all-time favorites include Transformers action figures, a new hockey stick, and a Playstation 4.

The gift I was the most excited about, however, was a Sidney Crosby "stadium series" jersey from 2017. I remember I was so excited and since have worn it to many Penguins and Nailers games. It definitely takes the cake as my favorite Christmas gift of all time. While I love receiving gifts, I always try to remember to stay humble and grateful. If we become so focused on Earthly treasures, we tend to become distracted, and lose focus on what God has in store for us.

To be honest, I think I like giving gifts more than receiving them. Don't get me wrong, I love receiving gifts, especially if it's something I really wanted. But, there is something very special about giving gifts and making other people smile. Doing secret santa with my siblings every year is really fun and I love to see their reactions to what I get for them.

Usually, I get them something silly, but they seem to enjoy whatever I get them. I think it's crazy how even the simplest gifts can mean so much to someone. Homemade gifts, for example, are great because it's not about how much money you spend, but how much thought and effort you put into it. It shows someone you took the time to make something special just for them. You may never know the impact you have on someone's life and how the smallest acts of kindness can go a long way.

While we all love to give and receive gifts, we can't forget about the ultimate gift. Jesus Christ is the ultimate gift and the true meaning of Christmas. God gave us Jesus to save us from our sins, so we can spend eternity with him in paradise. Jesus knew this was God's plan all along and never backed out or quit because of his love for us. It is often said that there is no greater gift or act of love than to lay down one's life for another.

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, Thank you for the blessings you give us every day, and the opportunity to give and receive gifts. Help us remember that gifts aren't about how much money we spend, but about the thought, time, and the love we put into them. Teach us to be grateful for what we receive and to find joy in making others happy. Most importantly, help us never lose sight of the greatest gift of all, your son, Jesus Christ. Thank you for sending him to save us and show us what your agape love looks like. Help us carry that love throughout the Christmas season and each and every day. In Jesus name, Amen.*

When I was a young girl, I remember my mother always baking so many cookies at Christmas time and we were only permitted to eat the rejects. The reason my mother would make at least 15 different kinds of cookies was…she gave them as gifts! She always said it was better to give than receive. As I got older, I would help her and then one day when I was in my early twenties, we were invited to a chocolate candy making class. That started a new tradition, not only did she give cookies away, we also gave chocolate candy away.

Since I was making the majority of the candy and mom was making the cookies, I also started giving cookies and candy as gifts. Not to as many people as my mom did, but the candy was a perfect teacher gift for my children's teachers. To this day there is a certain Canon-Mac retired English teacher that attends our church that still receives at container of candy every Christmas. And I know Jim Reynolds looks forward to receiving his container of candy every year.

When my mom passed away, I could not stop the tradition. I continued making the cookies and candy to give away as gifts. I do not make as many cookies as my mom did but every time I read one of her recipes in her handwriting, it is like she is right there beside me. As my mother always said it is better to give than receive.

Prayer: *Spirit of the Living God, descend upon us this season. May the sweetness of your grace fill our hearts, minds, hands and homes with a healing balm. Bind us together in your love, that we may continue to share the aroma of your grace throughout our community. Amen.*

During the early years of a person's childhood, the happiest parts are often highlighted by four events: Easter, Halloween, their birthday, and of course, Christmas. Now, what makes Christmas especially so happy for the children is to see all the amazing gifts wrapped under the tree, the lights on and inside their houses, and finally, that warm feeling when you have family/friends around spending time with each other. The children see this warm, caring, and happy environment, and do well to associate this with a singular word: Love. Now isn't that beautiful. To be able to so crucially make a single day show love that could last a lifetime in the memories of others is truly a spectacular feat. And believe it or not, the main factor keeping those happy memories and making that day such an impact to their lives, is the sense of their own belonging in it.

For humans, as a whole, we are social creatures. We spend our lives moving day to day without second thoughts on what we feel like is routine, yet if you were to ask for the most impactful part of our lives, it would be the social interactions & connections between our friends, family, coworkers, and anyone else we meet along our long and arduous journey in life.

We think constantly of others', whether it be their opinions of us, how we think of them, or just quiet observations we have in the midst of everyday activities. So, if we think so much of others, and they think so much of us, what is stopping people from including your fellow siblings in Christ into the happiness of your life? What makes you think that they wouldn't want to be included, if it's just because of your already formed opinion on them which couldn't possibly see underneath the top soil of their hearts?

My goal, a goal I invite all to participate in this Christmas season, is to hold your opinions or self-concluded thoughts of those around you from allowing others inside the wonderful and happy things happening in your life. And as I end this message, just remember that those people too, want just to be included as much as yourself in the happiness and sense of belonging we humans have been given by our father above.

Prayer: *Dear God, for too long have we been rejecting others because of our own thoughts not having scratched the surface of their hearts. Help us today, this season, and throughout our following years to take courage and give not out of hope that others would receive and give in turn, but that they would only take in and enjoy the happiness we spread to the fullest so that your love may be shown to them as well through us. Amen*

This past year, for the first time in a decade (even during Covid), I didn't officiate a single wedding. This coming year, I have as many as five on the docket – so I guess I'm going to make up for it! I mention this, because in the closing prayer of my wedding liturgy, I ask God's help for them to "*build a home of peace where no one is a stranger."*

How exactly do we *build a home of peace*?

As someone who grew up in a home where "*raised voices"* were as common as middle-schoolers-midday-snacks, "*peace"* wasn't necessarily the first word that came to mind for me. This is *not* to say I experienced "*violence"* – at least not in the traditional sense. Sure, I was spanked some as a kid, but I can't necessarily recall a specific event. And I never received, or saw dished-out, any other example of physical violence.

But *words* can be pretty *un-peaceful* as well.

Building a home of peace is about a lot more than just removing physical violence. Sure, it's a start, but it's not the endgame.

Cutting words that tear people down, are not the evidence of a peaceful home, let alone a peaceful *heart*. Words that belittle and degrade, words that shame and blame, words that embitter the hearts of our partners and our progeny can, I dare say, cause as much pain as any hand, or switch.

Building a home of peace has to include the words we speak – aloud, under our breath, and even in the privacy of our hearts and minds.

Which leads me to the core. I think that *building a home of peace*, begins in our own hearts. If we start to cultivate peace in our own hearts, especially through practices like contemplative prayer, we first recognize the peace that *doesn't* exist around us, and our own *desire* for peace. And the more we cultivate that peace in our hearts, the more that the words and the actions that *come from our hearts*, will be words and actions of peace. And the more the home we're building – the brick and mortar one where we lay our heads – along with the homes we work in, worship in, and *drive in each day* – will become homes of peace.

May you experience a heart of peace, as you let Jesus have more and more of it, this Advent season.

Prayer: *Prince of Peace, be our peace. Be our guide, helper and strength, that we may rest in you forevermore. Amen.*

Crafting homemade gifts is woven into my DNA and has greatly contributed to my happiness since a young age. I was advised to pursue a career in interior design, but unfortunately my DNA was missing the gene to sketch designs. This was well before computers could accomplish this with software (now you all know I'm not 32 as I tell people). My sister did receive that talent and I have had many conversations with God as to it not being fair. He told me to work with what He has provided. God has put many people in my creative path over the years and our projects together have given them a purpose in their retirement. I have been blessed to be married for the past 41 years (oops more confirmation about my age) to my husband Derek who has been by my side for many creative shenanigans. There has been a wide variety of projects over the years. The one that we have collaborated on for 40 years is stained glass, which uses both of our unique talents to create designs.

So now that you know the back story, let's move on to the hospitality part. We have had many birthday parties over the years for our boys, Derek and Dennie, and have used our creativity to design themed parties; including decorations, food, games and favors. Keep in mind, this was before the ability to consult google or Pinterest.

So now we jump ahead to about the past 15 years and what we do for Christmas Eve. I may take some heat for what seems like not appreciating family togetherness, but why are there so many holidays from Thanksgiving to New Years Day? Since we see each other so often, we decided to do a secret themed Eve! The family excitement and bribes start in October. I send out a family text message with clues allowing them to send a guess only to me what the theme is. The first one to guess receives a prize and is sworn to secrecy. Over the years we have covered many nationalities, a luau, a fiesta, Christmas Around the World, A County Christmas and my favorite was Disney's Haunted Mansion Christmas.

So my inability to sketch has led me down an unusual hospitality path that God knew would be a perfect fit. I am a Martha and get distracted with serving people, which is my gift to our family. It has also led me to plant the seed for others to find their creativity and often donate their work to others. Since you are church family, I will give you *a* clue and tell you that this year is going to be a "Big" one.

Prayer: *Master Crafter, as you have woven the world into being by your Word made flesh, and the work of your hands, may I continue to encounter you afresh and anew in surprising places. Thank you for welcoming me in with open arms and giving me eyes to see your presence this season. Amen.*

There have been a lot of times in my life where I have received certain homemade gifts. Well, not me personally, but my family. Our next-door neighbors always give us a homemade craft that we display somewhere in our house. Not only is it very thoughtful since neighbors aren't necessarily required to give out Christmas gifts, but it's also just very kind, as they take the time and effort to make it for us. Similarly, my grandmother on my dad's side loves to can fruits and vegetables she grows in her garden. When she and my grandfather come for Christmas, she would bring down some canned goods for each of us.

The fact that she thinks of all of us and decides to give us each some of our favorite canned fruits or vegetables is so generous seeing as how she prepares and makes them.
When we receive homemade gifts, we feel very loved and cared for by the fact that someone has taken the time to create something special for us that is unique, instead of just buying a gift. Of course, I'm not saying buying gifts are bad, but there's always something wonderful that happens when we get a though-out, homemade gift from someone.

I've been talking a lot about gifts we (my family) have received, but how about a homemade gift I have given to someone else. In 5th grade, we were doing a weaving project in art class, right around Christmas. Seeing as I knew my grandma loved to knit and do fun crafty things, I thought my weaving would be a perfect gift for her. And it was! She loved it and I will never forget how happy it made me feel when she got the gift.

When we give a homemade gift, it's different from getting one. We know how much time and effort goes into making it, so it becomes very satisfying when we see the person light up when opening it. It's amazing to think how one small, homemade gift can bring so much joy.

Off the topic of Christmas, my birthday was just last month and some of my friends wanted to give me a few gifts. One day, one of my friends asked me if she had to buy a gift, saying that she instead thought about making one, I said no and that as long as she believes I will like the gift she can create whatever she wants. She ended up giving me the cutest little clay figures ever, and I absolutely adored them!

Christmas gifts never have to be bought or elaborate for the person being gifted it to like it. In my opinion, I think homemade gifts are the best kind. They come from a special place of the heart that loves and cherishes the person who the gift is given to.

God's homemade gift for us is Jesus. He brought Jesus into the world to save us. That's just how much God says he loves and cherishes us, to be able to gift us his son, Jesus. Whatever you may be getting your friends and family for the holidays, just remember that if God can give you his incredible homemade gift, then don't be afraid to do the same.

Prayer: *Father of Lights, may I shine with your love this season. Amen.*

Some of the most treasured gifts I have received didn't come from a store. They came from the hands of people I know and love. Over the years, I have been blessed with homemade gifts of all kinds. Being a teacher, mother, sister, aunt and grandmother, some of my favorite handmade gifts came from the hands of little ones. Although these gifts take many forms, they each carry the same precious thing. They carry a piece of the child's heart, their excitement in creating and their joy in giving.

In our family, handmade gifts have become a tradition in a special way. My husband, Gary, is a woodworker. Beginning with our daughter, nieces and nephews, Gary makes wooden toys for Christmas. Over the years this tradition has grown to include great-nieces and great-nephews and now our granddaughters. What started as a few special gifts has grown into a tradition we both love.

Gary works in his shop turning pieces of wood into gifts like toys, puzzles, banks, dolls and jewelry boxes. I get to help by adding finishing touches, painting where a little color is needed. It's something we look forward to doing together. Each gift is designed with that particular child in mind. The older I get, the more I realize the gift isn't really just the toy. It's the thought and time spent choosing the item to make, the love that goes into something created especially for someone else, and the joy in seeing it continue from one generation to the next. And perhaps one day, as the children are grown, these toys will remind them of Christmases spent with family, handmade by the hands of someone who loved them dearly.

As I think about Pastor Don's recent sermon series, "Seeing Jesus Everywhere", I find myself thinking about all the ways we can recognize Jesus in these moments of our lives. I see Him in a child making something special for someone they love. I see Him in the time, care and love that go into creating something for that special someone. And I see Him in the joy of giving and receiving.

Perhaps that's why handmade feels so much like Christmas. These gifts are a visible form of love, just as God, our Father, gave us the visible form of His love by sending His Son, Jesus. A gift freely given, not because we had earned it or deserved it, but simply because He loves us. I think about the love that goes into creating, the heart that loves and the joy in giving. We each have been blessed with our own talents. Not everyone is a woodworker or painter, of course. Some sew, some bake, some write, some craft, some have helping hands and some share their kindness and time. Our gifts may be different, but when shared with love, they all become expressions of the same beautiful gift.

As we move through this season of Advent, may we be reminded that the most meaningful gifts don't have to be perfect or expensive. Their true value lies in the love with which they are given. This Christmas, may we look for Jesus in the simple moments, share our gifts and talents, and find joy in sharing them with others. And as we give and receive, may we remember that the very first Christmas gift was wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in a manger. It was the gift of God's love, given to the world through His Son. That is a gift worth celebrating at Christmas and all throughout the year.

Prayer: *Come, Lord Jesus, into my heart today, into my heart to stay. Amen.*

December 10 Luke 1:52-56 Ruth Bershok

Every December, I set up a card table in the dining area to serve as our holiday "goodie table." Preparing it is a labor of love. First, I make frosted fruit using red and green apples and pears. I dampen each piece with water, roll it in sugar, and set it on wax paper to dry before arranging it in a bowl. Next, I bake a batch of Corn, Wheat, and Rice Chex at 250 degrees for an hour, pausing every 15 minutes to stir. Once it cools, I fill large glass jars and carefully label the lids to show which ones contain nuts.

As I set everything out, I am reminded of how God prepares a table for us out of deep love. Giving doesn't have to be complicated to reflect Christ's love. Sometimes, it looks like a simple card table, a bowl of sugared fruit, and a warm batch of snacks shared with the people around us.

Prayer: *God, our Provider, you fill our hearts with love, our souls with grace, our bodies with healing and our bellies with the bountiful harvest of this earth. May the work of my hands, the gift of my presence, the light of my love, be forever a reflection of your goodness to me. Amen.*

December 11 Luke 1:57-61 Michael Amos

Instead of sharing about one specific Christmas gift, I want to reflect on an entire category: the homemade Christmas decoration. These gifts tend to fall into two distinct categories. The first is held together with generous amounts of glue and, somehow, still carries the faint aroma of Crayola markers decades later. The second showcases painstaking craftsmanship, thoughtful detail, and artistic expression through a chosen medium—whether ceramic, canvas, yarn, thread, or something else entirely. Both have their own charm, and I would choose either over just about anything found on the shelves of a big-box store. Why?

Because homemade gifts carry something beyond their craftsmanship: the love and memories of the person who made them. Some of these decorations remind us of family members and friends who are no longer with us, allowing their love and presence to remain in our homes long after they are gone. Others transport us to prior Christmases where we celebrated with the same people in different ways. Each year, as we unpack these treasures, we rediscover not only the decorations themselves but also the stories, laughter, love, and moments that have become part of our family history.

A homemade nativity, handmade ornaments, colored pictures, and a ceramic Christmas tree are among the treasures that hold a special place in my heart. As I display them year after year, I remember, reminisce, and rejoice in the hands that made them. Many of these gifted decorations can be found in the same place in our house from year to year; the stabilizing handiwork of a creator that loves us and gave me a gift during the most magical time of the year. Just as a handmade decoration carries the imprint of its creator, our lives bear the mark of the One who made us and loves us. And just as these decorations return to their familiar places in our home each Christmas, the truth of Christ's love remains a steady and faithful presence in our lives, through changing seasons and passing years.

Prayer: *Rock of Ages, I rest on your unfailing love, your immeasurable grace and your steady presence in the world and in my heart. Amen.*

"I don't need any more *gifts*."

Most of us, somewhere around midlife, look around at our lives and make a statement something like that. I've done it more than once. I've talked about time and experiences, about the gift of having family *together*. I'll never forget when asking my Dad what he'd like for a birthday or Christmas, and getting back the refrain "*Just having you with me is enough of a gift!*" And while I didn't really get it then, I certainly do so now.

There's only so many trinkets or t-shirts we can have, before they start *having us* – and we're buying a new bookshelf, storage container or, pray tell, *storage unit* to *house* all that *stuff!*

On the flip side, there are people – like my wonderful wife Bridgette – who absolutely *love* to *give* gifts. And to say "*no gifts please*" is tantamount to telling her "*I don't love you.*" (Ok, maybe not *that* bad). Gifts are, necessary or not, a tangible representation of a heart-felt emotion, an appreciation, a *love* that transcends the actual *thing* that is given. And to *give* is as much of a beautiful thing as to *receive*, is it not?

It takes me back to those childhood gifts that each of us made in Sunday school or elementary school classrooms with crayons, markers, glue and glitter, that to our eyes, were the most magical creation we could muster for our parents, grandparents, siblings and extended family. Because they were, *made with love*.

In the same way, the refrain from every good family cook or Christmas-cookie-baker, who warms the hearts and bellies of friend and family around the holidays, *"made with love"* – their secret ingredient whenever asked. It's not an ingredient you can list on the recipe, but it's one that can be seen in the twinkle of an eye and the upturned cheeks of a smile. And it can be felt by the temperature in the room – warmed to a perfectly comfortable and cozy sweater-like sixty-eight, when the outside air is sub-zero.

Love, made real, means a tangible expression. It can come in words, and it can come in time spent together. It can come in out-of-the-ordinary experiences, and it can come in the sacrifice and service we offer in service to one another. And it can come in a box, bag or envelope – whether it cost a small fortune, or just the patience of a first-grade-teacher who guided the child away from tasting the glue and cutting their finger.

May God's love, find real expression in you and your home this Advent season.

Prayer: *From everlasting to everlasting, you are God. Guide me in the way I should go and how I can make your love real to one person this day. Amen.*

When we think of Christmas, we often think of gifts wrapped in beautiful paper, homemade cookies, handmade ornaments, and special traditions shared with the people we love. These gifts are wonderful because they come from the heart. But sometimes the greatest gifts cannot be wrapped, purchased, or repaid.

I learned this through my dad, Tom.

In October 2000, my dad underwent a liver transplant. Unfortunately, the first transplant did not work, and he soon needed another. On October 17, he received a second liver from a donor. Behind that gift was a family who, in the midst of unimaginable loss, made a decision that gave someone else another chance at life.

My dad spent months fighting for his life. He endured numerous complications, surgeries, and setbacks. He was unable to walk and went more than four months without speaking. During that time, hundreds of people from different churches and denominations prayed for him. Doctors, nurses, therapists, friends, and family helped carry him through.

One of my most treasured memories happened at the Greenery rehabilitation center. I arrived for what I thought would be another ordinary physical therapy session. Without warning, my dad spoke to me. After more than four months without hearing his voice, I heard him speak again. We hugged and cried. It was a moment I will carry with me forever.

Eventually, on March 20, 2001, he finally came home. My mom and I had decorated the house with balloons and signs to welcome him. His family, friends, and even his little cocker spaniel were waiting. My dad later wrote a story called *Tom's Miracle* to express his gratitude to the donor's family and everyone who helped him along the way. He ended his story with these words:

"Words alone cannot express what this second chance at life means. You can rest assured that I won't waste it." Those words have stayed with me.

When I think about our theme of Homemade Christmas, I think about how my dad turned his experience into a gift for others. Through his writing, he left behind a reminder of the power of generosity, faith, prayer, and love. The donor's family may never have known the full impact of their decision. Yet their gift allowed my dad to return to his family, make memories, and experience life he might otherwise never have had.

And isn't that what giving from the heart is really about? We may never fully know how much a simple act of kindness, a prayer, a thoughtful word, or an unexpected gesture means to someone else. As we enter this Advent season, I am reminded that the greatest gift ever given wasn't wrapped beneath a Christmas tree. It was given through God's love for us: Jesus Christ.

This Christmas, may we remember that we don't have to spend a lot of money or create something perfect to give something meaningful. We can give our time, compassion, prayers, encouragement, and most importantly, our love.

My dad received the gift of a second chance at life. He left behind a story of gratitude that continues to inspire me. And I hope that by sharing it, his gift will continue to touch others.

May we all find ways to give a little more of ourselves this Christmas, remembering that the greatest gifts are always made with love.

Prayer*: Heavenly Father, thank You for the gift of Your Son and for the many ways Your love reaches us through others. Help us recognize the blessings we receive and become blessings in someone else's life. Teach us to give with open hearts and remember that even the smallest acts of love can make a lasting difference. Amen.*

December 15 Luke 1:76-80 Jane Hultman (entry from 2024)

My devotional today is not about a gift that I received, but instead about a cherished gift that I gave away. When Dick and I were first married and before we had our two sons, we decided we would make Christmas gifts for our family members. I love to cross stitch and Dick loves woodworking, so each year we spent time deciding on and completing our projects.

One year, I found a beautiful angel tree topper kit made by using plastic canvas, yarn, and beads. I made one for myself and loved it, so we bought two more kits – one for my mom and one for Dick's mom. For many years those angels sat on top of our family Christmas trees. Our boys saw one on our tree every year and saw the others on their grandmothers' trees when we visited them for the holidays. Our granddaughters saw mine on our tree when they came to our house for Christmas. It was a family tradition.

The years went by and sadly our mothers both passed away. While going through their belongings, I spotted those angels and retrieved them. Three years ago, I gave Clara and Greta each one of the angels that were made by their Grammy for their great-grandmothers. They love them and have them in special places in their bedrooms year-round. I love that the gift of an angel made decades ago watches over my granddaughters and reminds them that God watches over them and protects them each day.

Prayer: *God of Glory, Lord of Light, as angels ascended and descended in the presence of Jacob, so too you constantly call and send messengers in our midst. May I receive your message and carry it along, this day and forevermore. Amen.*

One card helped me remember how love doesn't mean expensive gifts and has changed my perspective on how I give gifts now. This year at VBS, I was in the music crew and made a connection with a girl in 3rd grade. If you have ever helped with VBS you know it's an amazing experience, but near the end of the week it gets a little tiring.

On Friday, the girl told me she couldn't come to the program that night, but she had made me a card. She gave it to me on Friday and gave me the biggest hug. Right then and there, I remembered why I showed up all week. To see younger kids learn about God's love. After that, I realized that the amount a gift cost doesn't matter but the time and thought you put into it. I love to get gifts don't get me wrong, but the true joy I experienced in giving gifts is indescribable. I have always loved seeing someone's face light up when they see what you got them.

I want people to understand what real love looks like and how great it feels so that when they feel God's love, they know it is God in their life. I feel like people also say Jesus loves you which couldn't be truer, but it goes so much deeper than just a saying. Jesus showed his love for us through so many actions. His biggest way of showing us love was dying on the cross for our sins. He was a perfect man and took our imperfections so we could be clean again. Isn't crazy that the biggest act of love was an action?! It was a personal action just to show how great God's love is. In 1 John 4:16 it says, "so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love…" I want others to know what God's love is like and once they recognize it rely on him and his love for the rest of their life.

And learning that love doesn't have to be something big, it could be so simple and mean so much to someone. I will always remember how something might not seem like a big deal or might not be the best gift, but the other person might remember it for the rest of their life. It could help them understand the love of God and how it can come from others, which can cause them to share God's love onto others.

Prayer: *Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace - you who are from everlasting to everlasting - set your seal on my heart and empower me with your love to live as your chosen disciple, the one you claim is dearly beloved. May I live into that love today, in word and in deed, to the glory of the Eternal God. Amen.*

Growing up and well into my adulthood, *home* at Christmas, was my mother's house. Long after I'd moved out into my own place, I'd still be coming *home* to her house, sit around her table, and enjoy her food on Christmas Eve. Her pies were especially tasty – it's the reason why I can't resist a piece of just about any flavor, to this day!

Over the years, special traditions developed, starting at her home – I'd take a pie up to my friend's family's celebrations on Woodland Ave or Markwood Dr.

But over the years, when mom could no longer bake pies, or care for herself and as my friends and their families stopped hosting Christmas Eve celebrations, things changed. There was a time, after the fire in particular, where I wasn't even sure if I wanted to celebrate Christmas. So much change, so much loss, so much upheaval – all I wanted was to snuggle up under a warm blanket and let the season pass me by. And then, like the glint of moonlight off new fallen snow, the scent of mom's pie wafting in from the kitchen, the hint of bells ringing far off in the distance – it dawned on me, where my home really is.

You see, for fifty-three years, *home* at Christmas, has been 112 West Pike Street. Every year, twice actually, I bundle up and trudge out in the rain or snow or sleet or calm and work ever-so-hard to offer to you, and to Jesus, the gift of my musicianship at the piano and organ. By the time the final notes of the *Hallelujah Chorus* are sung, I'm spent, and want nothing more than to fall back into that couch, under the covers and sleep.

But I don't. I can't. Not yet.

I linger on that organ bench. I look around at the faces of the choir members, at the faces of you, the assembled worshippers, and I feel the warmth of being *home*. Because I am, here, with you. *You* have made a home for me. *You* have welcomed me into your Christmas celebrations for fifty-three years. *You* have allowed me to share my gifts and my passion, to *Klink Up Christmas*, and for that, I am forever grateful.

I know where my home is at Christmas. It's among you, my church family. Thank you!

Prayer: *Father, I will sing of your praises, joining with the choir triumphant and filled with your joy. Amen.*

"Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." — 2 Corinthians 9:7 (NIV)

There is a unique kind of magic in a gift made by small hands. A slightly lopsided clay ornament, a crayon drawing with colors spilling outside the lines, or a folded piece of construction paper covered in carefully sounded-out words—on the surface, these things cost almost nothing. Yet to a parent, they are priceless.

Children do not have bank accounts or the ability to walk into a store and buy something grand. What they do have is their time, their imagination, and their effort. When a child sits down to create something just for you, they are giving you the very best of what they possess. Every smudge of glue and crooked scissor cut represents focus, pride, and love poured straight from their heart onto the page.

Because their resources are small, their offerings carry enormous weight. In the Gospels, Jesus paused to notice a poor widow who dropped two tiny copper coins into the temple treasury. While others gave out of their surplus, she gave everything she had (Mark 12:41–44). In the same way, when a child hands us a handmade gift, they are offering their whole heart. Honoring that gift—hanging the ornament front and center on the tree, taping the drawing to the refrigerator, or tucking the letter into a keepsake box—tells them, *"I see your hard work, and I treasure your love."*

Looking back over the years, those handmade mementos become far more than clutter or holiday decorations; they become an archive of a child's growing heart. And behind many of those treasured keepsakes are the quiet, patient hands of teachers, Sunday school leaders, and caring adults who set out the supplies, guided the steps, and encouraged our children to create something meaningful. Their thoughtfulness gave our kids a way to express love—and gave us memories we get to hold onto for a lifetime.

Our Heavenly Father receives our offerings in much the same way. Compared to the Creator of the universe, we are like little children with very little to offer. Our prayers can feel clumsy, our acts of service imperfect, and our faith small. Yet God never measures our gifts by their worldly value or polished perfection. He looks straight at the heart behind them, delighting in every sincere offering we bring to Him.

Prayer:
Heavenly Father, thank You for the gift of children and the pure, joyful way they share their love. Thank You for the teachers, mentors, and caring adults who nurture their creativity and help them bless others. Help us to always honor and treasure the gifts made from the heart, just as You delight in the imperfect, heartfelt offerings we bring to You each day. Amen.

"When have you felt close to God" – it's a question that we ask every New Member, every Deacon-elect and Elder-elect when we do our annual orientation. It's a question that's meant to help prepare people to reflect on their journey of faith, their life with God that has both times where we feel close and times where we feel far from God. And one of the answers that comes up in every situation is "*The birth of my child."*

I well recall the pride and joy of wearing my only pink t-shirt to the scheduled birth of Bria, our only daughter. I remember the joyful anticipation building as Bridgette was sitting in the shade of a hot summer day, having contractions while I preached, on the eve of Aidan's birth. And I remember the flood of tears when Brennan was born and I mis-understood his time of birth as his weight – he was born at 8:10pm and I had weight 8lbs, 10oz at birth.

Joy isn't something we can *make* happen, anymore that we can *make* a child happen, as my kids reminded us each time they were born. Brennan decided to show up three and a half weeks early, in the middle of me writing a final paper for a seminary class. I wouldn't have made that call, if I'd had the choice. Bria was too cozy to come out, so she needed a little help – and still we couldn't *make* it happen. Aidan was the most convenient, showing up Monday morning, but it wasn't an easy night for Bridgette and we headed to the hospital way earlier than a night-owl would have liked.

But the *joy* of welcoming each of them into our lives, our family – into the world – was real and true and *erupted* from us all on its own.

No, the best we can do is to cultivate the environment, to set the stage for joy to come. Stepping out in a *Hope,* firmly planted in Jesus, Creating a home and heart of *Peace*, Expressing the tangible gifts of *Love* in ways that reflect God's love – these cultivate an environment where *Joy* can take root, and erupt in a beautiful and profound way.

This reminds me of the opening lines of that great Christmas carol by Isaac Watts:

Joy to the world!

The Lord is come;

Let earth receive her King;

Let every heart prepare Him room,

And heaven and nature sing

Joy comes to us, in Jesus Christ, as we make room for him – not just at Christmas, but always. May you continue to cultivate a heart that can receive him, this Advent and beyond!

Prayer: *Jesus, because of you, I have the joy, joy, joy, joy, down in my heart. Thank you. Amen.*

As far back as I can remember, I've been in the kitchen. Both of my parents are blessed with supreme skill, my mom in baking and my dad in cooking, and while Christmas is a time for LOTS of good food (and I mean lots) there's something special about the scent of fresh cookies going into the oven that is so intrinsic to the season.

One of my family's greatest and most dearly held traditions is baking cookies for Christmas. Some years there are several rounds of baking, sometimes they don't get made until a week or two beforehand, but we always set aside time to be together in the kitchen, singing, talking, and enjoying each other's company while we bake holiday treats.

It's traditions like these that you realize just how much you miss when you go off to college. Suddenly, I must wait so much longer into this special time to bake with my family and have the joy of being with them around the holidays. It's delayed gratification, but the distance and waiting can be hard, especially when I finally do come home and everyone's at work and school!

But this has led to a new tradition for my family: for the past couple of years, and again this year, I've been able to come home and use my ample free time to cook and bake for my family. We still have our cookie-making sessions together, but I've absolutely loved being able to bless the people I love most by serving them in this way. My family can come home from work and school to fresh baked goods and hot food. We can be together, watching a movie, singing and enjoying yummy treats!

I recall Paul quoting Jesus and saying, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35) and I definitely have seen that in my life! Christmas is famously a time for giving, and in the lead up to celebrating Christ's birth we often love to give. But these words came after Jesus was born, and it's always been his heart to give at all times. After all, I'm sure that Jesus makes the Christmas cookies every year, but I'll also bet that he doesn't just stop after Christmas. Let's pray.

Prayer: *Dear God, thank you for Christmas cookies, and thank you even more for the people we make them for. Father, thank you for this time to reflect, remember, and love. Help us to give in the season, and keep giving afterwards. Help our hearts to be soft and attentive to others, like yours. We love you! Amen.*

To quote Julie Andrews in "Sound of Music," these are a few of my favorite things about Christmas:

Singing in the Choir - I have been a choir member at every church I have attended, and I look forward with great anticipation to be singing the carols that share the beauty of Christmas. The way the music hangs in the air at the end of the *Hallelujah Chorus* and covers the church gets me every time.

The Children's program - I have enjoyed helping put programs together, enlisting the kids, adjusting the halos, watching the kids get excited about their part in the program and how it brings the Christmas story more clearly to them because they were part of it, not just observers.

Sharing the Christmas spirit (and cookies) with others - Whether it is a bell ringer on a corner or a nurse helping to make the holiday special for families with loved ones in the hospital, taking them cookies lets them know how much their work and care is appreciated.

Sharing Christmas with my family - whether in my home as I grew up and how we had to wait on the stairs (seemed like forever, because my brothers would pretend they were still asleep) until my parents said it was OK to come down to the Christmas tree. Or, now as my boys have grown up and out of the house they grew up in, by taking Christmas on the road to spend the holiday together physically and/or by phone or texts.

Christmas cards that let me catch up with friends who don't live close and lets us share the special events of the year - both happy and sad - with each other.

Taking time in the quiet moments at day's end, when all the memories can be revisited, and you can feel all the best of Christmas in your heart.

Prayer: *King of kings and Lord of lords. You reign in my heart and this world, forever and ever. In the quiet of this hour, my heart sings your praise and I encounter you with joy and gladness. Amen.*

I don't mean to brag, but I've been named "Best Teacher Ever" more times than I can count. I have the drawings to prove it. In many of them, it's beautifully written in crayon right above my head, in case there's any question about who deserved the title. When I receive one of these frequent awards from my students, you better believe I make a big deal out of every single one. If a kid's going to name me Best Teacher Ever, the least I can do is give a proper acceptance speech.

I get these Best Teacher Ever gifts all the time: drawings, notes, beaded bracelets, sculptures, and even a handknit hat once. I love making a fuss over every single one of them. I'll hold up a picture so the whole class can see or put a bracelet on right then and there. By the end of my acceptance speech, I make sure that kid knows I see how much time they put into their gift and how much it means to me. And it does, truly! Of course, after ten years of teaching (I know, you didn't think I was old enough to have been teaching that long!) I've gotten pretty good at telling when a gift is from the heart or when somebody's just hoping to earn a little favor. Sometimes a kid gets in trouble in the morning, and by lunch they're awarding me "Best Teacher Ever" again – in full color, no less! I can respect the strategy.

When my school shuffled teachers to balance class sizes, I got to move up to third grade this year with the kids I'd just taught in second. Getting another year with this group of kids has been one blessing after another. One of those blessings began last year when a student started surprising me with handmade gifts. She starts her mornings in Extended Day, our before-school program. Each morning, she can choose to play games, shoot hoops in the gym, read, or make something artistic. Morning after morning, she spends some of that time making something just for me.

Once she arrived at the room, she'd hand me whatever she'd made, and I'd give her the full acceptance speech. What began with an occasional Best Teacher Ever drawing here and a bracelet with my name there became a daily ritual. At some point, I stopped being surprised that she'd made me something and started wondering what she'd made that morning. But there's only so much time between unpacking and the first lesson, and somehow six or seven kids always seem to need me the very second they all walk through my classroom door. Even I couldn't keep up with a full-blown acceptance speech every morning. Still, she kept coming in, unpacking, and quietly leaving her gift on my desk.

She's been doing this long enough to know I might miss it altogether. If you've ever seen my desk, you know that's a risky place to leave anything you want to be found. Some days, by the time I find her gift, the moment for a speech has passed. I'll look up, catch her eye, and give her a little wink. She gives me a look right back. Her gift tells me she cares, and I think my wink tells her I care, too. These days, that's the whole acceptance ceremony. She leaves the gift on my desk and goes about her morning. Tomorrow, before I've even had a chance to notice, she'll do it again.

"We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). I keep coming back to that word *first*. Before we could ask for him, before we could do a thing to earn his love, God came to us as a baby in a manger. By the time the shepherds got there, he was already among us. Love had made the first move.

Sometimes it takes a third grader with a handful of crayons to remind me what it looks like to love first. She had a little time that was hers to spend, and she spent it on me. A few beads on a string or a crayon masterpiece are enough to tell somebody, "I thought of you this morning, and I wanted to remind you I care." I wonder who could use that reminder from us this season.

Prayer: *Jesus, in this Advent season, remind us that you came to us with a love we never had to earn. Teach us to love our neighbors just as freely. In the way we listen, welcome, and make room for one another, may someone who's wondered or wandered know they belong. May they catch a glimpse of how deeply you love them. Amen.*

December 24 (Christmas Eve) on Back

Like so many beautiful, cherished Christmas traditions...I have no clue when exactly this one started. At some point, something you do just becomes a part of what you always do. In the Coleman household, we have cinnamon rolls and coffee while we open Christmas presents and the breakfast casseroles bake in the oven. There's something special about sipping a cozy cup of coffee and nibbling that warm, spicy cinnamon roll when you're watching your loved one open the gift you picked out just for them. For many years, when Brennan, Aidan, and Bria were little, we simply bought the classic Pillsbury Cinnamon Rolls (or Annie's Organic, if we wanted to be bougie).

However, one year after we moved to Canonsburg and our kids were a bit older, we found Lori Fulton's Cinnamon Roll recipe in our CUPC Cookbook and decided, "let's do homemade cinnamon rolls this year!" Game changer! A tradition we thought couldn't be better became...BETTER. First of all, making the cinnamon rolls with the kids was time-shared and another new memory. Plus seeing how it all came together - from the dough rising and the fragrant cinnamon/brown sugar filling to fun floss-cutting and the icing drizzling over top - felt very satisfying. And then of course, the taste - the flavors made better knowing it was HOMEMADE.

So what IS it about homemade items and gifts that make them so special? It's because they're personal. They're purposeful. They're significant. They're one-of-a-kind. It's not just about the item itself, but about the whole experience and the story surrounding it. So it was when Jesus came into the world as a human baby. This special gift given to us was ***significant*** - the star marked where he was born. This gift was ***purposeful*** - Jesus was part of God's plan all along and the prophets reminded everyone of that. This gift was *personal* - God loved us SO much that he would not be divided from us. Instead, he intertwined himself with us. His story is our story. As it says in John 1:14, "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory..."

Prayer: *Lord God, we are always in wonder over the works you have made. Thank you for showing us your love through the ultimate gift of Jesus. May we always remember how special this gift is and may we always be filled with wonder, showing others your love and light in this world.*







