

Grace Upon Grace

Advent devotional 2022

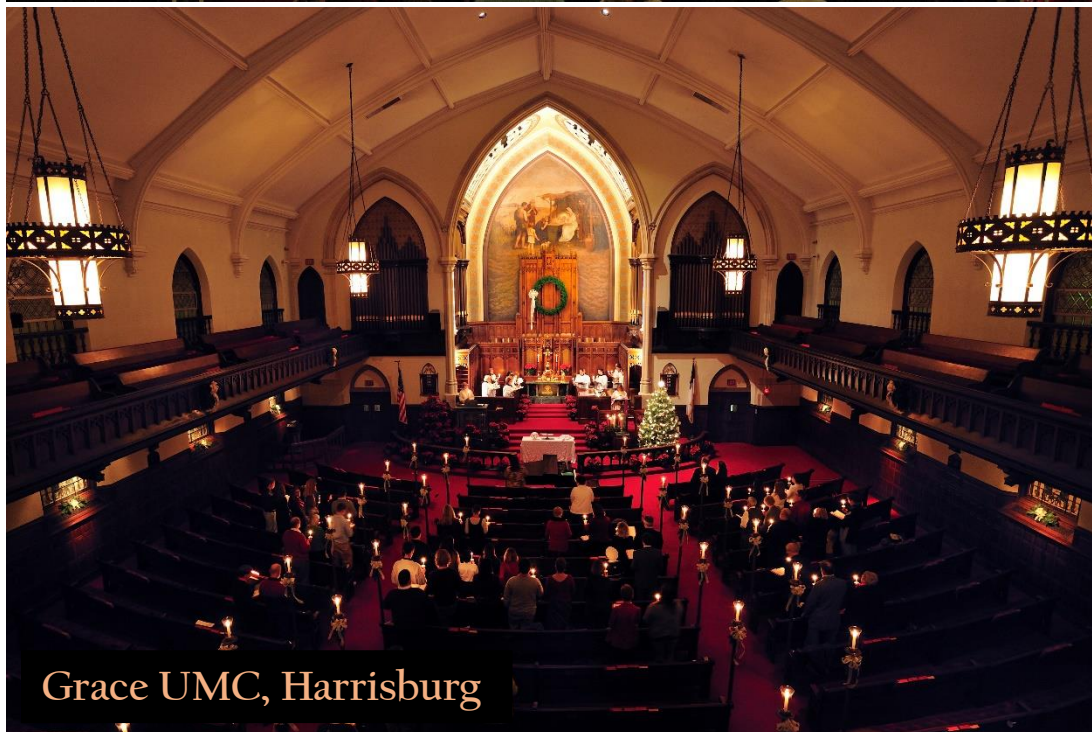




PHOTO: CHRISTIE R. HOUSE

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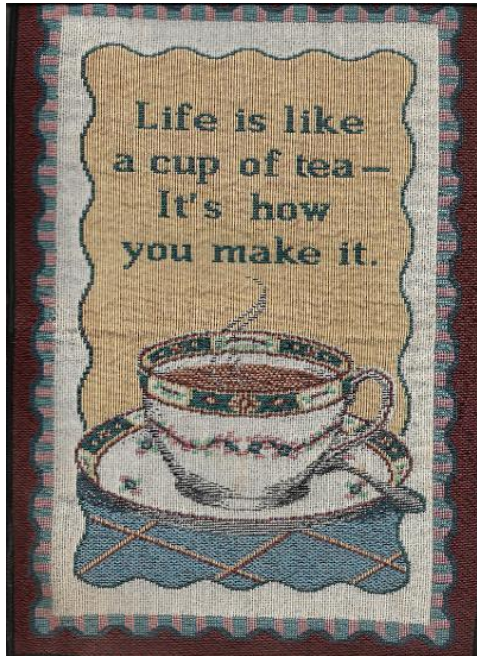
PHOTO: CHRISTIE R. HOUSE

Life is like a cup of tea; it's how you make it

By Sue Kompare

But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

Matthew 24: 36



I am a tea fanatic! I begin each morning with a strong cup of the good stuff. It warms my body, heart and soul.

A new day is an advent of hope, just like the first Sunday of the Advent season in the Christian church. It gives opportunity for an early morning walk to enjoy nature at its best. Outside it is peaceful and quiet. God is in heaven and all is right with the world, at least in my little corner of the world.

During this day, all kinds of things may happen – some very good and some very disturbing and sad. I rejoice with the good stuff and fall apart with the bad. Illness of loved ones, wars, disasters and poverty darken my day. My cup may crack, break apart and, like my heart, feel empty. Where is my faith? Has God let me down? Has it

all drained away like my morning cup of tea?

Then, something strange begins to happen. Suddenly I feel angels all around me, a hawk circling, a sunset, family, friends, neighbors, children playing and even strangers whom I have never known before. Slowly I begin to feel my spirit and my faith return.

By evening I have a new cup filled with strong tea and new hope. Each day is a gift, use it wisely. Matthew 24 says “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.” Have a tea party, invite Jesus and share a cup with your master and friend.

Prayer: Dear God, give us new and refreshing hope each day. Help us to look for the dawn and remember that you do not leave us in the darkness of night. Your light will come, even in the darkest days of December.

Sue Kompare joined Grace UMC, Harrisburg, in 1999. She has served on SPRC, UMW, worship committee, as a delegate to annual conference, and for several years, she enjoyed helping to serve the breakfast for neighborhood friends.

Comfort, peace and joy in a lowly birth

By Barb O'Neill

Beside this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near.

Romans 13:11-12

I will admit – after reading or listening to the news, especially following all the campaign commercials, I am ready for the Lord Jesus to come again! I mean how wonderful will it be when Christ is our king!? We know he is righteous, fair...and who loves us more? But God is God and only God knows when. He is on his own schedule and let's face it, God sees all and is much wiser than all of us.



PHOTO: KATHLEEN BARRY

The season of Advent, for me, is a good time and opportunity to reflect and remember just how awesome our God is. I think about Mary and Joseph's faith as they obeyed the Word of the Lord through their journey. I realized that I must increase my faith and work on trusting more. I find it helpful to remember how the Father has always shown his faithful love throughout our entire history. God saved Noah and his family, brought his

people out of Egypt, parting the sea so they could walk on dry land to safety. And then to secure their safety, God brought the water back to drown their enemies. God leads them across the desert – protecting them, feeding them and providing water through a rock! And of course, the incredible love between King David and God is encouraging, inspirational and beautiful. Time and time again, the Father has shown us his complete, powerful and amazing love.

Knowing that we are weak and can be easily led astray, God in his infinite wisdom, mercy and grace sent us Jesus. He came to walk among us. I find comfort and peace in his lowly birth and that it was first announced to the shepherds, common folk, just like me. It absolutely amazes me the patience and understanding that our Creator has with us. His complete and unconditional love is truly endless.

I find that Advent is a season of remembrance and rejoicing. Truly a season to follow through every day of my life. A wonderful way to share with family, friends and community, the celebration of the birth of our Savior and King. To celebrate the fact that it doesn't matter whether Jesus returns today, tomorrow or a thousand years from now; He is with us right here, right now! And he always will be.

Prayer: Most holy God, we humbly come before you, on bended knee. Help us to fully understand the magnitude of your love, not just through the season of Advent, but forever. In his name. Amen.

Barb O'Neill is a member of Grace UMC, Lemoyne.

From more, more, more to the real reason for the season

By Stephen Drachler

But nobody knows when that day or hour will come, not the heavenly angels and not the Son. Only the Father knows...Therefore, you also should be prepared, because the Human one will come at a time you don't know.

Matthew 24: 36, 44 (*Common English Bible*)

Our commercial, secular-driven culture has conditioned us to view Christmas as a time of more, more, more. The best way to enjoy the holiday season is to spend more, eat more and party more. It's been the way of American culture for decades and decades.

The pressure from more is enormous. It has, in many respects, taken the meaning of Christ from Christmas. It produces profound feelings of guilt from those who believe they have let their children and loved ones down by not buying more, and it produces unmet expectations from those who have been conditioned to expect more and more at each Christmas celebration and find themselves disappointed when they are not met.



Holiday stress tightrope - photo compilation by Kathleen Barry

Holiday stress tightrope – photo compilation by Kathleen Barry

Deep down, we know this is not what Christmas is all about. We've been conditioned by more more, more, and it has separated us from the real, lasting meaning of the season.

It's not easy to break the pattern of more, more, more and make Christmas about what it should be: the birth of Christ and his life-changing love for all. In our house, the change happened gradually. We learned to move from expectations of spending more to focus intentionally on the meaning of the season. We found that as we did this, Christ showed up in unexpected places. It made our gift-giving much more meaningful, not from a pressure to give more, but to give out of love and the real context of the season.

Our Christmases have been transformed. The pressure of more, more, more has eased, and the holiday has become what it should be: about the life-giving and life-changing love of a God who shared his son with the world with a promise of everlasting life.

Prayer: God of love, giver of life, help us to let go of the pressure of more. Help us to see that your son is with us wherever we are. Help us to learn that the season is not about more, but about becoming closer to you as we celebrate his birth. Amen.

Stephen Drachler is a member of Grace United Methodist Church, Harrisburg, PA. He is a retired professional communicator who is dedicated to seeking justice for people who have no voice in the world.

God knows our heart and sees our actions

By Sue Lehmer

There for you also must be ready, for the Son of man is coming at an unexpected time.

Matthew 24: 44

I saw a news clip on TV recently showing security camera footage from a private residence. It was Trick-or-Treat night and a child approached a porch that had a large container of candy. But alas, the container was empty, even though the sign said to “Help yourself to one treat.”

The footage showed this young child reaching into his own bag of treats and putting some of his bounty into the empty container! Not only adorable, but admirable! Not exactly what a homeowner would expect to find when the cameras had surely been installed to capture the imagine of any thief who dared break-in to steal precious belongings. We are so careful to guard our things, but we must also be more careful to keep watch over our words and actions. What a wonderful example the young trick-or-treater set for all of us.

I recently read a quote from Andy Stanley: “Actions don’t only speak louder than words, they should be used to interpret words.” So even a smile, a wave, a compliment or another small act of kindness can mean a lot to others if it is sincere.

Sometimes after I speak or act in haste or in anger...or just don’t speak or take action when I should, I later remember an old saying: “Three things come not back – the spent arrow, the spoken word, and the lost opportunity.” I know I can ask God’s forgiveness anytime, and I can ask for human forgiveness too. But Matthew reminds me I need to keep watch over my tongue and my actions. I need to be sure they express what is truly in my heart. None of us knows when a missed opportunity or a misspoken word will be our last. We need to be constantly mindful that God knows our heart and sees our actions, and he knows if we’re sincere. We need to be certain strangers as well as friends also know our heart and see God through our actions.



PHOTO: JOHN COLEMAN

Prayer: Help me to be as careful with my words and actions as I am with precious possessions. Help me be confident enough to fill others' buckets with your love. May I follow your example of faithfulness. Thank you for the gift of your grace. Amen.

Sue Lehmer is a member of Grace UMC, Lemoyne.

Health promoters graduate just at the right time

By Nan McCurdy and Miguel Mairena, United Methodist missionaries

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

Luke 1:78-79 NRSV

The light of God takes many forms at the Give Ye Them to Eat (GYTTE) center in Puebla, Mexico. As we prepare again to receive the light of Jesus in the short, dark days of the year, we also remember the many ways God has accompanied us along the way, at times lighting a flame that spreads beyond GYTTE into small villages and up winding paths into the mountains in the state of Puebla and other states of the Southeast Methodist Conference of Mexico.

We see light dawning in many of GYTTE's programs as people learn ecological ways to grow nutritional foods, draw clean water from the earth and build dry composting toilets, wood-saving stoves and earthquake resistant dwellings with natural materials.

We also see the light growing as women learn about how their bodies function in order to promote health as well as recognize and help prevent disease in their communities.

Eleven women graduated as Health Promoters from our community health program. Graduation means the women have successfully completed three courses taken over 18 months, each course covering about 25 topics. We offered the third advanced course this past September. The women should have graduated a year ago, but COVID-19 has changed life for all of us. One woman, Elvira from Oaxaca, graduated nearly 20 years after her second course. She is a successful leader and specializes in encouraging villagers to give up drinking sodas and start saving. Another woman, Faviola had a huge goiter removed when she should have taken her Advanced course. She was thrilled to finally graduate.

The Indigenous people in Mexico are generally relegated to remote areas. We are very pleased that five Indigenous women, from both Totonac and Nahuatl tribes and who still speak these languages, will be better prepared to serve their villages in promoting health. Among the graduates was Ocotlan, a Nahuatl woman from a village in the mountains of Cuetzalan, seven hours from Puebla. She is a leader and a specialist in natural medicine who taught natural medicine in the first course.



Health promoter training at Give Ye Them to Eat in Puebla, Mexico. PHOTO: COURTESY OF NAN MCCURDY AND MIGUEL MAIRENA

These courses were taught in a participative fashion. Topics covered were: reproductive systems, menstruation, pregnancy, delivery, the post-partum period, family planning, prevention of sexually transmitted illnesses, HIV-AIDS, breast and cervical-uterine cancers, prevention of gender violence, heart disease, taking pulse and blood pressure, menopause, andropause, prostate cancer and more.

One of the ways the women process what they learn is through presenting social dramas. It's easy to see what they have learned, and the dramas are both tender and funny. We keep boxes of men's and women's clothes and they "play" their parts.

Along with using their knowledge from the three courses with family, neighbors, churches and friends to monitor high blood pressure, or diabetes, or care for a cut, wound or burn or give an injection, the women also teach different health classes.

It was really an honor to be with the women for a week in their learning process. Yes, we see God's light surrounding us in many ways. We await the dawn of Christ, coming to us again as Zechariah predicted, guiding our feet into the way of peace.

Prayer: Gracious God we thank you for the light you send to lead us in the ways of peace. May we offer our knowledge and experience freely to others who seek to build peaceful and healthy communities, so that more people may experience the abundance of life Christ offers every day.

[Nan McCurdy](#) and [Miguel Mairena](#) are a missionary couple serving with Give Ye Them to Eat in Puebla, Mexico. McCurdy served the people of Nicaragua as a missionary from 1985 to 2014 and she and Miguel worked for 20 years with women and youth through the Women and Community Association in San Francisco Libre prior to their assignment with GYTTE.

Wake up...and answer

By Christie R. House

Beside this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone the day is near.

Romans 13:11-12

Have you ever had an inexplicable feeling that you've have been called to do something? My father-in-law, the Rev. Al Reasoner, a missionary and pilot who planted hundreds of churches in Brazil and traveled by plane, described a time when he was flying, and he knew he was supposed to land the plane. He hadn't received a call or gotten any direction from the Presbyterian mission he served; he just knew he should land the plane...NOW. And he did – and found a person in dire need of medical care, whom Al then flew to the hospital.

How did he know? It was a moment he awoke, maybe not from sleep (hopefully, since he was behind the wheel of an airplane) but from one level of consciousness to another, a deeper, more mysterious level of consciousness in which God was dwelling.

I don't always remember the times I answer these calls – show up in the right place, or just at the right time. But I remember the times I had the feeling and didn't answer. Like when a friend of mine at work came to my door at the end of the day and said, "can we talk?" But it was a time when I had younger kids waiting at home and a carpool to catch, and I suggested we make a time to meet later in the week.

A week or so later I made time and offered to walk her home, but her head was down, and her eyes were vacant. "No," she said. "No, not necessary now. It's ok."

Later that week I found a card that said, "I'm here, anytime you want to talk." But then, we received news in the office that she had passed away very suddenly. Yes, she needed me, right then, when she asked, a good friend and a gentle soul. And I knew I was being called for her, and I was unable to go back and fix it.



I'm here for you...
If you want to talk or you just want to sit
with a friend and have a cup of coffee.

I kept that card a long time. It reminded me to wake up and listen to that deeper voice calling. Could I really have done anything to help her? I will never know. But I think of her often, that dear friend and gentle soul.

Prayer: Mysterious and wondrous God, help us to wake up in the moments you need us. In those times, when we listen to you and respond to those around us, we find ourselves closer to you and more in tune with the message and life of Jesus, our savior, coming again this year in the form of a baby. May we hear you and respond.

Christie R. House is a member of Grace UMC, Harrisburg, and a writer and editor with the UMC international mission agency, the General Board of Global Ministries.

Stay together

By Hilary Holmes

He shall judge between the nations and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

Isaiah 2:4

Isaiah 2:1-5 reminds me of many common science fiction themes, as I am a fan of optimistic science fiction. Most science fiction stories that I encounter portray humans as having something unique to contribute to the universe; in my opinion, this aligns with Isaiah's vision. I believe humans are not perfect, but we are uniquely valuable; we just have to allow ourselves to be the more evolved versions of ourselves.

I think almost all science fiction shows define a future in which humans have learned to work together as a planet, however, this only happens after a third world war or some type of global catastrophe.

I believe that there is a possibility that the world could avoid this fate and pivot to global cooperation without a disaster. I see hope in many places I occupy.

One example that gives me hope happened during the 4th of July fireworks display in Harrisburg this year. My girls and I were with our family friends on the palisades by the river; we were three adults and five children ranging in age from 5 to 11.

While waiting for the fireworks to begin, I heard the people in our party stand up, so I turned around to see a wave of human beings rushing north toward us. We all jumped up and I yelled "stay together."

I told my girls that the most important thing was to not get trampled and to not trample anyone else; there were tears, there were loud noises, and there were a LOT of people.

As we moved with the crowd there were discussions about what caused the rush of people; there were fears that there was a shooting, or even an active shooter, but we found no news on the internet about Harrisburg.

The group worked to keep families together and none of the grownups repeated unproductive thoughts.



PHOTO: MELISSA HINNEN

During that walk, I pointed out to the kids that they and everyone else did a good job; when faced with a scary situation, the people in Harrisburg worked together. I pointed out that in many other places in our country and our world, people would have been trampled, but in Harrisburg, that did not happen.

Prayer: God of all people, please help the advantaged people to follow the lead of disadvantaged people on the ground, so that the world may avoid being be trampled on the way to Isaiah's vision. May we hear the voice of the people on the ground, skip the third world war or global catastrophe, and help the advantaged learn that all of us just want to have air to breathe and a safe place to plant our feet.

Hilary Holmes is a member of Grace UMC, Harrisburg.

Hope for a future that seems impossible

By Lisa Bender

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.

Isaiah 11:1-10

When I opened the text message and saw the first sonogram image of our soon-to-be grandchild, I was filled with complete joy! After a long wait, we will finally have a grandchild. My next thought was: this child will be a Palestinian child (well, $\frac{1}{4}$ Palestinian) – how will that impact his or her life?

Jesus lived in Palestine over 2,000 years ago, and it's his birth we are preparing to celebrate, as we do each year. Jesus was born into an impossible world where the wolf and the lamb could not be friends. Still today, would a wolf ever REALLY lie down with a lamb, and what would happen if it did?



Today, this Palestinian shepherd would have a hard time making it over the separation wall or through Israeli checkpoints to get to Bethlehem. PHOTO: PAUL JEFFREY

The seemingly impossible struggle consuming my mind is that of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which began with the creation of Israel by the United Nations in 1948. That

required the impossible task of splitting the Holy Land where Jesus lived and walked, into a state for the Jewish people and a state for Palestinians, who both have a claim to the land. Instead of peaceably sharing it, war broke out, and by 1967, Israel took control of most of the region, imposing a military occupation on the Palestinian people. This continues in an increasingly brutal and illegal way today.

Jesus came to bring us hope that the impossible can be achieved. Our daughter-in-law and I are part of a large international movement of those who work toward freedom, equality and justice for the Palestinian people and security for the Israeli people. We educate. We advocate. We demonstrate. We pray that hearts and minds will someday be open to an equitable sharing of the land. We have hope for a future that seems impossible, and like Jesus, we stand with those who are oppressed.

Prayer: Gracious God, during Advent, as we ponder the Bethlehem story and the coming birth of our Christ, let us pray especially for the children of Palestine, born and unborn, that they may be given the opportunity to live full lives in a world where they are granted justice, where indeed the wolf and the lamb can live together in peace. Amen

Lisa Bender is a member of Grace Church, Harrisburg, and serves as the chair of United Methodists for Kairos Response <https://www.kairosresponse.org/>.

Clear the clutter, make way for the Lord

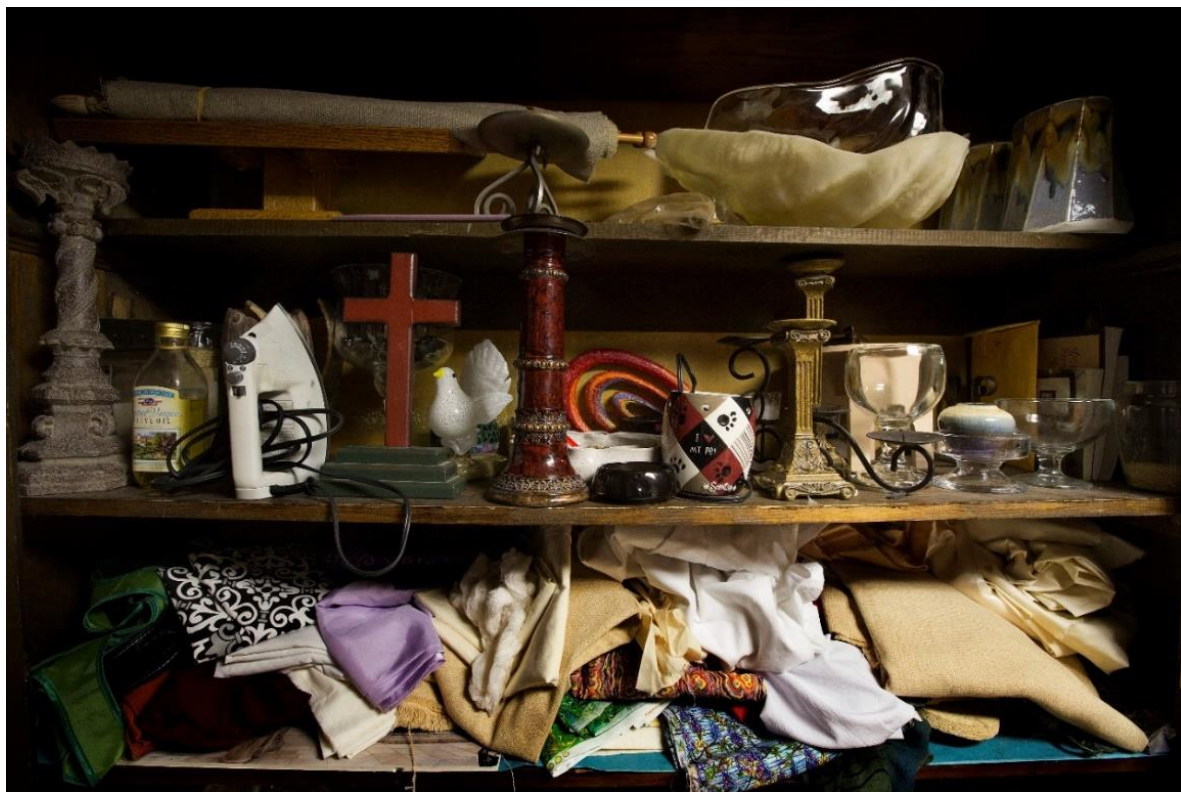
By Donald Reasoner

The voice of the one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

Matthew 3: 3

This week, we light the Advent candle of PEACE as we prepare for the coming of Christ, the prince of peace. I enjoy reading the Bible in different languages and benefit from comparing the many translated versions available in each language. Biblical scholars often translate the word SHALOM as Peace, and yet, it also has broader and more profound connections that include health, wholeness, well-being, harmony and integrity. It is intimately related to justice and reconciliation.

What are the conditions that make for PEACE? I believe the lectionary text of Matthew 3:1-12 gives us the initial steps in the process. We read that John the Baptist is the voice calling us to "Prepare the Way for the LORD, to make straight the path for the LORD." I find the version used in the Amplified Bible to be helpful. "Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness [remove the obstacles.]"



Church clutter - PHOTO: MIKE DUBOSE, UM NEWS

What are some of these obstacles we need to clear away? God created the world and blessed us with all we need for life. But as a society, we have distorted and misused our blessings, acted unjustly toward our neighbor, and sinned against God and each other. The message John the Baptist preached is “Repent, turn away from our sins and turn back to God. For the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.”

The gospel message was addressed to the community of believers. As individuals, we can personalize the message in our hearts, but we must never forget that we are part of a community. When the Bible calls us to repent; it is not an abstract concept or a feeling of being sorry. It is also not just for me as an individual, but it is call for our collective repentance as a community. There are many sins and “isms” in our society that we need to confess and change to “make straights the path of the Lord.”

John the Baptist challenged the religious leaders of his time, and us today to “produce fruit that is consistent with repentance [demonstrating new behavior that proves a change of heart, and a conscious decision to turn away from sin].”

Prayer: May we use this season of Advent to prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ who teaches us the way. He provides us with the gift of the Holy Spirit to strengthen the community of believers so that together, the purposes of GOD are fulfilled on earth as it is in heaven, restoring the Shalom/Peace of God in our community.

Donald Reasoner is a member of Grace UMC, Harrisburg. He has served as a United Methodist missionary in Nicaragua and New York City and worked for Global Ministries of the UMC as the director of Interpretations and Language Ministries.

Reaching beyond fear to find friends

By Reeba Imola Webster Bennett, Global Mission Fellow missionary

When I reached Montevideo, Uruguay, to begin missionary service as a Global Mission Fellow, I thought I would be working with youth and children. But the first place church leaders assigned me was Espacio VAR, which operates a shelter for people who have no permanent homes.

My first day was overwhelming. Many of the people in this shelter are trapped in situations of substance abuse. One was having a seizure in the corner, another was pounding his head with his hands. In another part of the room, someone was yelling, and another constantly asked for sugar. It was a troubling and difficult day for me.

But the following week, it was a little easier; I knew what to expect. I discovered the kitchen needed help, which was also the quietest place in the shelter.

As the weeks passed, I realized I wasn't interacting with people, so, when the shelter seemed calmer and the kitchen work was done, I sat down at a table with shelter guests. There I got to know one of the shelter guests by name. She helped draw me out of my shell with her story of how she came to be homeless. I wanted to know more about other people there too and started communicating with a few more. They shared stories that were really captivating – and some that were really sad or horrific.



Reeba Webster Bennett (seated at table with pink cup) meets with shelter guests at Espacio VAR in Uruguay. PHOTO: COURTESY OF REEBA WEBSTER BENNETT

I noticed one woman who was blind. Imagine living in a shelter with her condition. But she is determined; she doesn't sit and complain. She has friends in the shelter that help her get from one place to another, and I've learned what the true meaning of resilience is through her. She volunteers to clean the bathrooms, which no one else wants to do. She remembers how the bathrooms are laid out from when she had her sight. She does an excellent job – much better than the many who can see. Fortunately, her blindness is treatable. She has cataracts in both eyes and awaits surgery.

She is a positive and happy person, always smiling and polite. Every day she seeks to get closer to God. She and others I've talked with have shown me not to judge a book by its cover. I have learned from them to be patient, even though I shy away from those with addictions because their mood swings and outbursts are unpredictable. I go and serve in the shelter because many are in need for other reasons, for whom this space provides peace for a few hours, away from the streets.

I started a 30-minute time of reflection with those few and every Thursday we learn together from their stories and reading Scripture. The Lord is our refuge and our salvation. Together we also learned every parable about the amazing work of God and how, by faith, we can continue to serve others. So even though some days are difficult, and some of our guests unpredictable, the light of those days are people like my friends, Sandra and Carmen. Through their difficulties, they are still smiling and patient and very determined.

[Reeba Imola Webster Bennett](#) is a Global Mission Fellow from Honduras serving with the Methodist Church of Uruguay. During her two-year term, she will work in a variety of assignments supported by the Uruguayan church.

Global Mission Fellows

Global Mission Fellows are young adults, ages 20–30, who are committed to serve in social justice ministries for two years. They enter into new communities, understanding their challenges and assets through relationships and with the long-term goal to overcome systemic oppression. Fellows partner with community organizations internationally and in the U.S. to address a variety of issues, including migration/immigration, education, public health and poverty.

Devotion courtesy of the General Board of Global Ministries

Prepare the way for the Lord

By Jim Whetstone

This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

Matthew 3:3

When I go to the woods, my wilderness, I listen to the never-ending song of earth. I may hear a bird or two, listen to the water flow, smell the trees and plants, see the moss or a deer, feel the sun, experience the cool air, walk on the decaying earth and also know that the fungus and microbes and lichens are all doing their part to enrich this God designed place. In the forest there is no struggle between life and death. “All is divine harmony.” The stillness of this experience fills me with peace.



PHOTO: JIM WHETSTONE

In the forest everything depends on everything else. This is the Grand Indifference. In his book, “Nature’s Silent Message,” Scott Stillman writes: “Ominous clouds. Whipping wind. Feelings of radical inclusion, grand indifference. Everything is starkly equal. I could fall from a cliff or be struck by lightning and nothing would change. No ambulances, no sirens, no helicopters. No onlookers, no traffic jams. No story on the evening news. Just the whipping wind.” This is God’s world, where everybody and everything is equal.

Walking in the woods prepares me and reminds me of my humble existence in this world. Right in front of me in this deciduous forest are millions of living things all helping each other to survive. Who else could have designed such a complex system of life? This is God’s world at its best. John Muir summed up the whole and said, “how wholly infused

with God is this one big word of love that we call the world.”

Scott Stillman also writes: “...Come to the wilderness and the animals will remind you about the celebration of life. That once food and shelter are secured, celebration, beauty, and love are all we need. Love is everywhere, beaming from the trees, the sunlight, the clouds, the mist. We must only grab ahold of it and run wildly, out into the world with playful glee, celebrating the glory and splendor of life.”

When my time in the woods has ended, I depart, ready to care for life, love it, nurture it. For God has made all this. Everything connects to and cares for each other. God is not just coming. God is here. I am cleansed, invigorated, renewed and prepared. I know my place.

Prayer: Dear God, do I need Christmas time to tell me God is here, or do I just go to the wilderness, to a wild place to see God’s creations?

Jim Whetstone is a member of Grace UMC, Harrisburg. Many of his photos of the Grace church and sanctuary are found in the Grace Harrisburg archive.

That's what it's all about

By Wayne Bender

Repent for the Kingdom of heaven has come near. Matthew 3:2

Usually the Advent passage from Matthew focuses on preparations of our hearts and homes for Christmas based on Isaiah's voice in the wilderness...Prepare the way of the Lord! But instead, I need to and maybe our churches need to focus on John the Baptist's voice to repent?

And there is a children's song that I think would make a perfect Advent carol. Everybody knows it by heart, so I invite you to sing it...go ahead...stand up and do it...you're not standing...okay do it when no one is watching or listening.

Sing: **"The Hokey Pokey"**

So, did you put your right hand in and shake it all about? What about your left foot? Your left arm? Your head? Your backside? And don't forget your whole self? AND did you do the hokey pokey and turn yourself around? If not, do it now! That's what it's all about!



Put your whole self in...photo of Global Ministries staff in partnership with North Georgia Annual Conference for a UMC day of health. PHOTO: ANTHONY TRUEHEART

I know you think I'm crazy, but this is a perfect Advent carol!

You know God doesn't want us just to put our hands and feet into our faith and then take it out? God doesn't want us to put our whole selves in and shake things up and then jump out. God wants us to live our faith all the time. God doesn't want just part of us sometimes. God wants our hearts and our whole being to live faithfully all the time. But the real theology is we need to turn around – that's what it is all about. "Repent" means to literally turn yourself around! To *change your hearts and lives* as the New Revised Standard Version translates repent in the verse above!

This Advent – turn yourself around and recommit yourself to your faith. Especially since the pandemic, it seems many of us attend church now and then, put ourselves "in" a Sunday here and there, and then take ourselves "out" for a while. We got out of the habit of helping our faith grow by participating in a community of faith regularly. How else do you take yourself in and out of your faith, dip your toe in, but are not ready to put your whole self in? Is it time to turn yourself around and experience anew the re-birth of your Christ and your faith in your heart and soul?

Prayer: O God, help me to turn myself around and experience the love and joy of Christ this Christmas within my soul. Amen.

The Rev. Wayne Bender is a retired United Methodist pastor attending Grace UMC, Harrisburg.

There is a future if there is truth

By Hannah Reasoner

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.

Isaiah 11:6

Peace. What do you imagine when you hear this word? Maybe gentle nature sounds, quiet, stillness, no worries or stress.

Living and serving as a United Methodist missionary in Colombia has taught me another side to peace. Peace is also messy, complicated, challenging, and full of uncertainties and fears. Could you imagine being the lamb trying to lay down next to the lion?

In 2017, the peace agreement between President Juan Manuel Santos and Rodrigo Lodoño, leader of the largest rebel guerrilla group in Colombia, officially put an end to over 50 years of civil war. Today, Colombia continues on the long path of working toward peace. Part of this peace process included a Truth Commission with the mission of gathering testimonies, uncovering the truth of what happened and archiving their findings with a commitment to never return to this violence.



Hannah Reasoner (far right) playing a community game with children of a former guerrilla group that entered into a peace agreement and laid down their weapons. PHOTO: HANNAH REASONER

The [Truth Commission's final report](#) was released this year with the slogan, "There is a future if there is truth." The truth includes heartbreaking counts of war crimes and human rights violations committed by both the state and rebel groups. Uncovering painful truths is part of the (slow) process of healing, reconciliation and peace. Peace doesn't happen overnight when injustice, corruption, racism, misogyny and the many other discriminatory "-isms" have been the norm for generations.

Christmas's Prince of Peace was often seen as a troublemaker. He disrupted the systems of injustice to pave paths of peace and radical, inclusive love. Isaiah 11: 3-5 says, "He will not judge by appearance nor make a decision based on hearsay. He will give justice to the poor and make fair decisions for the exploited...He will wear righteousness like a belt and truth like an undergarment."

I believe that we as Christians are also called to continue Jesus's transformational and messy work of peace whether it's in Colombia, the USA or any other part of the world. It requires faith, hope, love, grace and patience, but we know that Jesus walks this path with us, leading the way.

Prayer: God of justice, following your word is not always easy for us. Peace doesn't always feel so peaceful at the beginning. Guide us on this journey of building your "kindom" of love and justice here on earth. Amen.

Hannah K. Reasoner is a Global Missionary of The United Methodist Church serving with the Latin American Center for Inclusive Communication (CEPALC) in Bogotá, Colombia. She is a covenant missionary with Grace UMC, Harrisburg.



Wesley Forest Lake. PHOTO: MICHELLE SCHWARTZMAN

The path of peace

By Michelle Schwartzman

The wolf shall live with the lamb the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.

Isaiah 11:6

Reading this Scripture instantly took my mind to Wesley Forest Camp and Retreat Center. I have found great peace there over the years. It feels like a place of peace away from the chaos of the world.

Just like it doesn't make sense that a wolf would live with a lamb, my chaos feels rest. When I turn down White Mountain Road, and I cross the bridge over the "crick," I have this feeling of peace. I love the smell that seems unique to this place.

Wesley Forest was and is a catalyst for countless relationships. There are many that I met there that I have grown close to. I have shared my life with them; we've uplifted and encouraged one another and have gasped for breath in laughter. This is a peace that love brings.

Jesus was the example for our bonds. I've been able to spend more time at Wesley Forest as an adult, in each season, feeling the peace of nature. Each visit I try to go to the outdoor chapel. I lay down on the wooden benches and look up to the sky with the towering trees. The branches reach in a circle breaking up the sky. This is peace.

I like to sit at Fossil Rock and watch the water of the crick rush by. This is peace.

I like to walk the road and hear the small gravel under my feet, then the path named "Path of Peace" and hear the leaves and twigs snap. This is peace.

Prayer: My prayer for us is that we have a place of refuge and peace, a place that we feel close to God. A place where chaos can rest.

Michelle Schwartzman, Grace Lemoyne and Grace Harrisburg, adores her family, loves adventure and is passionate about justice.

With a voice of singing

By Rebecca Lyons

Third Sunday of Advent – Love

As the celebration of Jesus' birth grows closer, there are so many nuances that the theme "Love" can convey. The first thing that comes to mind as I come upon my 71st year in this world is that our Lord's love and care have been with me through all my life's ups and downs, and he has never given up on me. For whatever reason, I feel he has blessed me with a love and appreciation of the sacred music I have been privileged to enjoy from all the church homes in which I have been welcomed over the years. The one consistent way that I have been able to show my love and devotion for God is my participation in choirs and lifting praises with the rest of the congregation as we all join in singing the hymns that have such presence in our services.



After the Christmas Eve service, the congregation of Grace UMC, Lemoyne, stands outside the church and sings "Silent Night" to their neighborhood. PHOTO: FRANK BAKER

One also should be influenced by the inspiring words of the hymns themselves, not just the instrumentals that go with the songs. My favorites over time have included "Jesus Loves Me", "Tell Me the Stories of Jesus" and "In the Garden." However, my all-time

favorite has become a simple one-verse response from 1992 by Bill and Gloria Gaither, entitled "There's Something About that Name," and here are the lyrics:

*Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. There's just something about that name.
Master, Savior, Jesus, like the fragrance after the rain.
Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. Let all heaven and earth proclaim.
Kings and kingdoms will all pass away,
But there's something about that name.*

So, sing out your hymns of praise, folks, and even utilize the lyrics as part of your spoken prayers!

"God bless us, every one." (Tiny Tim in Charles Dickens' classic story, "A Christmas Carol")

Rebecca Lyons was originally a member of the Pine Run Evangelical United Brethren/United Methodist Church in Linden, PA, for over 25 years and was an active member of the United Methodist Church in Shelburne, VT, for about 10 years. She has two sons who are both full-time Army Guard and have done foreign service in Iraq and Kosovo. She began attending Grace UMC regularly about five years ago, and this is her second year serving in choir.

Pure joy

By Marjorie L. House

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.

Isaiah 35: 1 – 10. Key verses: 1-2; 5-7a; 10



Fall 2022 colors in Harrisburg, PA. PHOTO: CHRISTIE R. HOUSE

My first impression as I read this beautiful chapter was, "This has everything!" There is a dry desert that blossoms, there is strength for the weak, health for the blind, the deaf, the lame, the silent. There are streams of water in the desert, pools of water in sand and everlasting joy and gladness. The people of Judah were on the edge of something very hopeful, completely different from their life of captivity. Imagine how they felt as they journeyed homeward. Seasons of pure joy are rare, and this must have been pure joy for them.

This past fall season has been one of the most beautiful I can remember. The colors were bright and varied – gold, yellow, red, orange, shades of deep green and delicate pink. The October sky was a clear lovely blue. I liked to walk early in the morning as the sun came up and the colors came to life. Many mornings as I walked, I would talk to God, feeling that presence very close in the opening day. But some days, the beauty of this particular fall season brought me to silence. There were no words to match the beauty spread before me, and no way to respond audibly to what I was feeling. It was just pure joy. Like the Israelites, I felt I was on the edge of something that was full of hope.

Moving through the days of Advent can bring that same feeling of being on the edge of something – just at the edge of hope and renewal as we prepare for Emmanuel. Wherever we are in our life journey we are again on the edge of newness. We are offered God's strength, God's calming presence, God's refreshing water, and blossoms in the dessert place. This is pure joy.

If you are in a painful wilderness right now, take time to rest in Isaiah's words of healing and strength. If this is a desert time in your life, God's refreshing water still flows in the dry places. Even in a time of stress there can be moments of blessing as you move through the day. Did someone help you open a heavy door? Did you receive a warm smile from someone you didn't know? Did a silly squirrel make you laugh with his antics? The wonders of the present moment can tell you that there is more to life than your present stress. Can you find a sense of joy in a lovely morning? Can you find a message of hope in Isaiah's words?

Prayer: Advent is a time to reflect on the promise that is ever new as God sends Jesus with words of hope and challenge. May we rest in the continuing promise that God cares about us – that God will provide what we really need in our lives, and that God will continue to enable us to work for peace and harmony among all people. Today, we are on the edge of hope, newness – and sheer joy!

Marjorie L. House is a member of Mt. Olivet UMC in Mechanicsburg.

Learning to accept the help and love of others

By Kara Grim

Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God...He will come and save you."

Isaiah 35:3-4



Virginia on the Appalachian trail. PHOTO: MIKE DUBOSE, UM NEWS

When the scriptures for this topic were sent to me, this one stood out because I went through a year of physical therapy for my “feeble knees.” Also, I have been working toward not having worry and questioning be my first reaction to

unfamiliar situations. With the issues with my knees, I wasn’t sure if I would be able to go for a hike again. I got stronger with the help of my physical therapy team and went hiking at Ohiopyle State Park in April.

As a nurse during this pandemic, I relayed on the support, knowledge, and care of my fellow nurses who had more experience with COVID patients. I have learned that I need people in my life that encourage me, help me stay calm and love me through my questions and doubts.

Lord, remind us to be grateful for those who love and support us when we are weak and feeble. Open our eyes to those in our lives who need our love and support.

Kara Grim and her husband, Kyle, first attended Grace Lemoyne in the Summer of 2017. Kara is a nurse who loves cats, board games and hot tea.



Grace UMC, Harrisburg, Altar at Christmastime. PHOTO: JIM WHETSTONE

God provides willing vessels to serve Hancock County, Mississippi

By Althea Belton, United Methodist Church and Community Worker



Left to right: Cheryl Thompson, executive director of Gulfside Assembly, Wanda Hilliard of the Hancock County Boys and Girls Club, and Church and Community Worker Althea Belton prepare a Hancock County school uniform distribution. PHOTO: ALVIN BELTON

By God's grace, I have settled into my new position as Community Outreach Coordinator with Gulfside Assembly of Waveland, Mississippi, and I absolutely love it. I am surrounded by the best of the best who have helped with my transition. Acclimating to a new state, job and culture can be emotional and challenging. Getting started in this position, I wondered where to begin. There was so much to do and only two of us to get it done. The needs of the community are great, and our resources seemed limited. However, I prayed and trusted God to make plain the vision. In a way that only God can do, God has not only given the vision but has amazed me with his provision.

We are working with a diverse group of nonprofits, grassroots and religious organizations comprised of different generations and cultures. These organizations have embraced Gulfside's mission, vision and purpose for their communities, primarily to advocate and provide opportunities for underserved, excluded and discriminated-

against people. We discovered these groups offer many gifts and talents but also have challenges and old conflicts. We learned that the challenges and conflicts served as lessons and preparation for greater outcomes.

As a representative of Gulfside Assembly and Global Ministries, I had to think about the dynamics of this group and quickly realized that we had to teach and model the behaviors we expected. It is important that our behavior exhibits Christian conferencing.

In doing so, we had to remember that our individual and collective focus is on the mission. As old conflicts were aired and dealt with, relationships in the group moved to a different level; the healing process began. I have grown so much from this experience of forming purposeful, impactful partnerships and collaborations to bring hope and healing to the Hancock County community.

An example of a ministry we are currently working on is family-centered support. Our faith-based group began an educational series offered by United Methodist Discipleship Ministries entitled “It Takes a Church to Raise a Parent.” Gulfside Assembly has a rich history and an enduring legacy. As such, the community has embraced our continued ministry and mission initiatives. My biggest lesson came from not only realizing that I was enjoying the fruit from the seeds that were planted through the years but also the importance of modeling the change we want to see in our society.

As I fellowship with local churches, Valena C. Jones United Methodist Church and Church of the Living God Resurrection, members often ask if Gulfside Assembly needs any help. What a mighty and amazing God we serve! Although we started as a small workforce, God has provided willing vessels to advance our shared mission and ministry. I am energized by this renewed movement of community unity focusing on families. I am also reminded of God’s promises. The magnitude of what God has done, and is doing, blows my mind. 1 Corinthians 2:9 gives the best summation, “What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived – the things God has prepared for those who love him.” (NIV)

Originally from South Carolina, [Althea Belton](#) was commissioned as a Church and Community Worker in 2021 and serves as the Community Outreach Coordinator for Gulfside Assembly, a historic African-American mission center founded in 1924. Though its facilities were destroyed by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Gulfside, with the support of the Mississippi Annual Conference and the Southeast Jurisdiction, has continued its mission to serve the community of Hancock County.

Devotion courtesy of the General Board of Global Ministries

Clothe yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ

By Sue Lehmer

The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light...Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ....

Romans 13:12, 14

A few weeks ago, as I was on my way home I decided to make one last quick stop at a grocery store, where I knew I could get exactly what I needed. I popped in, quickly gathered my three items, and headed to the checkout. I forgot! Only one lane was open with a cashier! That was becoming commonplace here, but not liking self-checkouts, I got in line behind three other customers with their carts full of groceries. I resolved to wait patiently and quietly – no foot tapping, or sighs, or comments about the lack of cashiers. It was after all, my choice.

As the lead person in line was paying, the person in front of me turned, saw my three items in my hands, and told me to go in front of her. Then the person now first in line saw me and stopped the cashier as she reached for her first item. She said I was to be checked out first! I left after many thanks and smiles. I felt so good about those folks

and their kindness. I told a number of friends and family about my experience. I was reminded again how important it is to show love to others. And I hope my sharing that reminds others that small acts of kindness reach farther sometimes than we'll ever know.

“Clothe yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ.” What an awesome, poetic image that is! Showing the world through actions what you believe with your whole mind, heart and soul. Showing that



PHOTO: FRANK BAKER

unconditional love that God grants us. For some, perhaps, sowing seeds of hope.

This Scripture also says “Our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here.” Oh, how easy to think about doing something and then putting it off! I believe I am a pro at that, but I pray I don’t put off the small acts of love and kindness that often take such little time but can mean so much.

I pray I can “clothe myself” with the Lord Jesus Christ. Amy Grant sings a song called “Father’s Eyes.” Seeing good where sometimes it’s hard to see and seeing things with compassion. And when the time of reckoning comes it will be said that she has her “Father’s Eyes.” I think that’s being “clothed with the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Prayer: Thank you for my many blessings, especially your unconditional love and salvation. Please help me to see the world with your eyes and wear your love so that the world sees who you are by my words and actions. Amen.

Sue Lehmer is a member of Grace UMC, Lemoyne.

The power of God's love

By Joyce M. Davis

Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God...He will come and save you."

Isaiah 35:1-10

One of the hardest things in life is seeing people you love suffer. We all want to stop the hurt, right the wrong and protect the innocent. But all too often, God seems to allow evil to triumph over good.

How do you comfort a mother whose child has been gunned down; or a wife whose husband is in prison? How do you reassure those living under the terror of war that God loves them and will be a strong arm of protection for the vulnerable and weak?



The Rev. Jack Amick (back to camera) of UMCOR prays with refugees from Ukraine living at the monastery for the Church of the Assumption in Cornești, Romania. PHOTO: MIKE DUBOSE, UM NEWS

During times of tragedy and despair, one thing holds true: sustained and fervent prayer soothes the spirit during the darkest of times. Calling out for God's mercy renews hope.

We see through a glass darkly now, but one day, we will understand the power of God's love to carry us through the storm.

Prayer: God, help us to know the words to say to comfort those we love during times of turmoil. Strengthen our faith so that we are able to see past the suffering of this world to the promise of a new life with you. Help us to understand these prophetic words: weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning.

Let us use the power we have in knowing you to ease the suffering of this world and those we love . . . in the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

Joyce M. Davis is PennLive's Outreach & Opinion Editor and she also serves as the Lay Leader of Susquehanna Conference.

Thank you, God, for this small life

By Deb Barr

Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God...He will come and save you."

Isaiah 35:3-4



Nurse Jennifer Eugenio tends to an infant boy in the neonatal intensive care of the Mary Johnston Hospital in Manila, Philippines. PHOTO: JAN SNYDER

November 30 – December 1, 1983: My husband, Tony, and I were anxiously anticipating the birth of our first child. I was 32 weeks pregnant and experiencing pre-eclampsia (high blood pressure and severe swelling). My doctor admitted me to the hospital for some testing and an ultrasound. Amid hushed murmurs as the technicians conducted the ultrasound, I became suspicious that something was amiss. Soon my doctor came in to confirm my fears. Our baby was not doing well (nor was I), and he recommended that our child be delivered two months early by Caesarean section.

Jaime Marie Barr was born on November 30, 1983. After fourteen short hours of life, she passed on to Heaven in the early morning hours of December 1st. Jaime was born with a severe heart defect that was unable to be treated. Hospitals were just beginning

to become more sensitive to parents' needs following neonatal death and still had a long way to go in this regard. Neither Tony nor I ever had a chance to hold our daughter prior to her being released to the funeral home. Our hearts were broken, and our faith was shaken. Our souls ached for what should have been.

As days and weeks and months passed, sadness still gripped us over our loss. Often, I would find myself asking, "Why God? Why us?" One day, as I was reading scripture, a verse from Ephesians 5:20 spoke to me. "Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." Always give thanks for EVERYTHING – not just SOME things! I was so rooted in despair that I did not think to give THANKS for Jaime's life, short as it was. Once I changed my mindset, the healing began.

Sadly, I have known of many couples since Jaime's birth and death to have experienced neonatal death. I have had the privilege to minister to them in their darkest times. I believe that God has allowed our faith to shine through the short life and death of our daughter. Our God has saved us and made us stronger through our faith and Jaime's life.

Prayer: Father God, let us be mindful to thank you in ALL things, not just the GOOD things. May we thank you even when we are not feeling thankful. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Deb Barr is a life-time member of Grace, Lemoyne. She is a retired certified school dental hygienist and continues to work part-time at Harrisburg Area Community College as an adjunct dental hygiene clinical faculty member. In retirement, she and her husband, Tony, enjoy spending as much time as possible with their three grandchildren, Brooklyn, Luca and Micah – the children of their second and only surviving child, Joshua.

“Be Holy Because I Am Holy” says the Lord

by Sue Lehmer, Grace UMC, Lemoyne

To be holy is the Lord’s call,
And this means giving your all.
From the world, being set apart,
Loving the Lord with all your heart.

Obey the Word, sincerely believe,
Always be careful not to deceive.
Earnestly follow God with all your heart.
When he calls, readily do your part.

With honor you must find your way.
Glorify God in all you do and say.
Be honest and humble and caring –
Certain it is a sincere witness you’re sharing.

Show outward signs for others to see,
But what you say you must inwardly be.
A compassionate heart and a character strong
Must go together if you’re not to go wrong.

Christ was the sacrifice of supreme cost.
Without Him, everything would be lost.
Because His example was without flaw,
What a challenge it is to answer His call.

To be holy is the Lord’s supreme call,
And this means truly giving your all.
All you do and say, right from the start,
Must show you are special – from the world, set apart.



Grace UMC, Lemoyne during Christmastide. PHOTO: FRANK BAKER



PHOTO: CHRISTIE R. HOUSE

Finding “warm Mongolia” in the coldest capital in the world

By Dexter Fernandez Ceballos, United Methodist missionary

As a United Methodist clergy member from the Philippines, my missionary assignment is to serve the “coldest capital city in the world,” Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia.

When I accepted this assignment, I knew that I would be serving this very vast and cold place and began watching videos about the country, its history, geography and culture. I was inspired but also a bit cautious because the people seemed reserved and a bit distant from foreigners. This could be because of their history, cold weather, or, in my case specifically, that only a few people speak English and I don’t yet speak Mongolian, making communication difficult.

But since we arrived, there have been many instances that have changed my perceptions about the Mongolian people. When we arrived at the airport, for instance, some church leaders warmly welcomed us, despite their struggles to speak in English, and they helped us acclimate during our first day.

On our second day, my wife Laraine and I decided to take a walk to explore our area and do some community mapping. After a long walk, we were so hungry, and we saw a small restaurant-bar. We tried to order, but the menu was all in Mongolian. There were no pictures and we didn’t even have internet data on our phone to use a translation app. The waiter could not understand our English, so we could not decide what or even how to order.

Then a big Mongolian guy across our table approached us and the waiter. Though he spoke very little English, he understood the word “beef.” We were not sure what kind of dish we picked, but he assured us it was beef.

While waiting for our orders, we had a little conversation with this stranger and told him that it was just our second day in the country. After a while, we were startled to see that our order came with an extra dish. The stranger told us that this extra dish was a traditional Mongolian food and it was his gift to welcome us to Mongolia.



Laraine Ceballos, the friendly Mongolian, the waiter, and the Rev. Dexter Ceballos in the restaurant.
PHOTO: DEXTER CEBALLOS

Ulaanbaatar may be referred to as the “coldest capital city,” but we have found the people be warm and kind-hearted, even to strangers like us. Some may be reserved and distant when dealing with foreigners because of the language barrier, but their body language shows their willingness to connect, especially when they hear the words *Sain Bain uu*, which means “hello” in their local language.

Although I am still struggling with it, I am eager to learn Mongolian to better relate to people in this remote corner of God’s world and further experience their warm hospitality and friendship.

[The Rev. Dexter Fernandez Ceballos](#) and his family arrived in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, in October 2022. Originally from the Philippines, he begins missionary service as the country director for the United Methodist Mongolia Mission Initiative.

Standing on the rock

By Russell Goodman

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.

Luke 1:53

The beautiful Magnificat, or Mary's Song, found in Luke 1:46-56, with verse 53 above. While describing the very opposite of the societal norm, these words also capture the belief of a young virgin, pregnant by the most mysterious of ways, that in the topsy-turvy world she lives in now, the Lord brings the certainty that he will be there for her. Faced with calumny and rejection, Mary accepts that the word of God's angel is true: the Son of God will be born to her; the world will know him through her. Indeed, she says elsewhere in the passage, "From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the



ODIM Guatemala (The Organization for the Development of the Indigenous Maya) offers quality healthcare and access to education in 2 villages in the highlands of Guatemala. PHOTO: ODIM

Mighty One has done great things for me."

Blessed ... but not easy. Where did she find strength? The late Jessy Dixon used to sing, "Where do I go when there's nobody else to turn to? Who do I talk to when nobody wants to listen? Who do I lean on when there's no foundation stable? I go to the rock, I know He's able, I go to the rock. When the Earth all around me is sinking sand, on Christ, the solid rock I stand.

"When I need a shelter, when I need a friend, I go to the rock."

In Luke, we see a young woman – a young girl, really – caught in a storm not of her making and one too great for many to brave. Yet, she found courage and strength through her faith in God. And soon she was to give birth to the Rock – to the Promise to us --

that when there is no one else to talk to, nowhere to go, seemingly nothing to be done to overcome the odds, we have a friend who is there for us and who can right things for us.

'Tis the season that we celebrate the birth of that friend.

Prayer: Sovereign, in the run-up to Christmas Day, we pause and thank you for the one who embodies the words: "I will never leave you nor forsake you." Amen.

Pastor Russell W. Goodman, New Branches Ministries.

We belong

By Christie R. House

...Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves are called to belong to Jesus Christ, to all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Romans 1:4-7

According to Paul, who was writing in the spring of 57A.D., as my NRSV Bible notes, we are called to belong to Jesus Christ and we are called to be nothing less than saints. Tall order.

I find Paul's choice of words a little unusual. Generally, we would say we are called to follow Jesus Christ, but Paul says we are called *to belong to Christ*. This makes me wonder – is belonging something we can be called to? It is not something we do, really, it is something that is very often inherent, like belonging to our families, or something offered to us, something requiring another person or presence to extend an invitation to us to come and join. So, if we are called to belong to Jesus Christ, then Jesus must be extending the invitation.



A sign at Kissy Hospital, Sierra Leone, inviting people to the church. PHOTO: JAN SNYDER

The Scripture contains some nuances here. Paul was an apostle who believed strongly that God calls everyone to the fold. Those in the early church were primarily Jewish, and there was within the church a strong current to allow only Jewish men to

belong to Christ, no Gentiles and no women. And if Gentiles were to join, they would have to go through the Jewish rites of passage and religious practices before they could belong. Unfortunately, the church of today also spends a lot of time deciding who can belong, who is in the fold and who is not allowed in, and what those outside the fold would have to do in order to be acceptable enough to belong.

But Paul believed everyone belonged to Christ, hence his invitation to the Romans, a Gentile community. To belong to our church communities, we don't have to meet list of demands and beliefs, because Jesus has already issued the call to belong, in a "come as you are" sort of way. The second step is to grow in faith as part of a community of faith that is itself growing, reaching to become saints, or as some translations indicate, a community called to be holy.

That is what is beautiful about belonging – you don't have to become a saint all by yourself, Jesus has provided and nurtures a community to help all of us get there, because we belong to Jesus.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, help me remember that first, you have called me to belong to you and you have provided a community of faith as my family. Please remind me often to reach out to the community you provide, to share my concerns, my highs and my lows, and my dreams for this community, so that we might all grow together to be a holy community that extends your invitation to belong to everyone we meet.

Christie R. House is a member of Grace UMC, Harrisburg. She has been a writer and editor with the UMC international mission agency, Global Ministries, for 35 years.

We take days and months to carefully choose the names for our children. We even take special care in naming our pets. Not only is your name yours, but it also carries all that you are.

When I read this Scripture, I think about how Jesus was referred to as Emmanuel because the meaning is, “God is with us.” The purpose was to remind believers that God is with them. That’s a comforting feeling for me. No matter what I think I know or don’t know about God, this powerful, unique God cares enough to be with people.

My prayer for us is that we revel in the comfort and joy that “God is with us.”

Michelle Schwartzman, Grace Lemoyne and Grace Harrisburg, adores her family, loves adventure and is passionate about justice.

Jesus is our living hope!

By [Fatuma Olangi Kutela Nana, a](#) United Methodist missionary in Luanda, Angola

In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

Acts 20:35 (NIV)

Hope is like a light shining in a dark place; and it is the waiting which gives us endurance, confidence and joy in our daily lives, no matter what difficulties we might face.

Widows and the retired pastors are my mission’s primary beneficiaries. They are not used to meeting as a community. Instead of serving them separately, I call them together in one location to disperse the produce and other goods we bring. There are no other widows’ or retired pastors’ groups that I know of. I am always amazed to see them blossom like young people as they get time to recall their life’s journeys. You can hear laughter and see smiles on their faces. They do not have much time for such moments, and they make sure they fully enjoy them, and I thank God for them.



Fatuma Kutela (center, standing, with the white purse) with a group of women receiving produce from the West Angola UMC farm. PHOTO: COURTESY OF FATUMA KUTELA

Being a widow, a retired person or, in short, a person in need, is not easy, but as long as we put our hope in God, we can smile in the midst of harsh conditions because God is the provider and God is love; God sent Jesus Christ to bring salvation to everyone. It is just a matter of accepting him as your Lord and Savior. It is same with all the difficulties we are facing in our life, it is just a matter of trusting that God the provider is on our side and will provide. That is why we should hold on to God with hope that something good is coming.

Whenever I donate produce from our farm, I hear words like “God never forgets his people,” and “He hears our prayers,” which means they have hope. A widow told me, “You are the light that we were waiting for a long time. I thought God forgot about us, but today I am sure God hears our prayers.” This is what Christian hope looks like. It doesn’t ignore fear, anxiety and doubt; it confronts them. This reality isn’t true only in good times; in fact, it is in dark and difficult times when hope truly shows its mettle.

Josepha is a pastor’s widow with seven children and a small house. She is a hard-working woman, and she took to me as soon as she met me. She goes with me to the farm regularly and we agreed she would sell vegetables in the market. Her earnings help her care for her family. This has opened many doors for her. She is now instructing one of her daughters on how to sell as well; so that when she is unavailable, her daughter can handle their business. Since they are two, they can be more productive. She feels she is a blessed woman since meeting me. She always calls to find out how I am; she has become a loving mother to me in this foreign country.

Dear God, as we await the coming of our living hope, we ask for patience, strength and the spirit of generosity, so that our hope doesn’t shake. We pray that love will be our everyday priority. Amen!

Fatuma Kutela, from the DR Congo, is an agricultural missionary serving the West Angola Conference in Luanda, Angola. Her husband, Kutela Katembo, is an agricultural missionary serving in Quessua, East Angola.

When God ran out of words

By Michael Minnix

Christmas Eve, December 24, 2022

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

John 1:1

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.

Hebrews 1:1-3

D.T. Niles, a noted Asian preacher, once began a sermon in a surprising way. He asked his listeners to stand, turn and face the back of the sanctuary. The congregation did that in rather puzzled fashion. Then he told them to turn back around, face the front, and sit down again. By then the murmur of confusion spread over the people. Then he said, "I have begun in this manner to demonstrate to you the power of the spoken word. As you have just witnessed, words make things happen. One person speaking to another involves far more than certain sounds being created, transmitted and heard. Words go out to do things and make a difference in the realities they touch. Words make things happen."

As the writer to the Hebrews noted, God had spoken volumes of words to God's people through the centuries, and those words had powerful effect: assembling and forging a community and a nation of people, establishing a faith based on God's grace and love, revealing a law that bound the community together in common service, etc. But now, when God wants to speak God's most definitive and revealing word, when God wants to communicate unmistakably God's hopes and desires for God's people, when God wanted there to be no possibility of misunderstanding what God was communicating...then...God spoke...and it was a baby.



An unmistakable message...a baby in a United Methodist well-baby clinic, Mpasa clinic, DR Congo. PHOTO: PIPER CRISOVAN

It was the baby whose birth we celebrate, and we celebrate because – here is God in a way and a form that cannot be mistaken. Here is love and grace, life and light spoken in a way that cannot be misunderstood or misconstrued. Here is our future and our hope and our life – God’s Word spoken directly, convincingly, unmistakably...not using words, but communicating powerfully.

A member of my congregation represented our area in the Pennsylvania Legislature. He invited me to serve one day as chaplain for the House of Representatives, which I was pleased to do. Shortly before the appointed day, he called me and said, “The day you are coming to the House is the first anniversary of the tragic shooting at the Amish school in Nickel Mines, Lancaster County. Could you be sure to include that somehow in your Invocation that morning.” My response: “I know just what to do.”

The press was all over the place when I arrived at the Capitol building and the time came to begin. I stood to the podium and invited folks to observe a time of silence in memory of those who had died at Nickel Mines and in honor of those who survived and still grieve their losses of that day. Then an invocation, and shortly thereafter, I left the chamber. How surprised we were to watch the news that evening and find myself featured there (at 6:00 and 11:00)! I watched it and said, "What a terrible thing." (Not my exact words!!) And Wendy responded, "What do you mean?...you were on TV!! I responded, "I've been preaching and leading worship for 30 years, and I get on TV for a moment of silence!!"

I learned an important lesson: There were no words that could communicate what was needed that morning. Respectful silence was the best option.

There was a time when God ran out of words, a time when words were no longer sufficient and could not communicate what God needed people to hear and know. But God did not give up or abandon us. God spoke in the most unmistakable way and God's Word was a baby. Now God's grace and truth, God's love and light, could not be mistaken or misunderstood.

The Rev. Michael Minnix is a semi-retired pastor of the Susquehanna Annual Conference serving as the visiting pastor for Grace Upon Grace parish.



PHOTO: CHRISTIE R. HOUSE

Unexpected choices on Christmas Day

By Jason Schwartzman

Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 1:20b

It's downright malpractice if you ask me. But I'm glad God didn't end up asking me. If God had shown me the plan to make sure the world knows about God's incredible and amazing love for each and every one of us, I would have laughed it out of existence...or at least offered a few major edits. Because let's look at it objectively: God's plan to share God's Kingdom was having a baby born in relative anonymity, not to a royal or high priestess...but to an ordinary girl...in an ordinary town.



Nativity from Peru. PHOTO: MIKE DUBOSE, UM NEWS

Objectively, the angels should probably have told the movers and shakers of the day that this child was born...not some stinky, bottom of the socio-economic ladder

shepherds. And the “wise men”? Fringe astronomers from some far-off land? I would have chosen someone with a little more credibility. While we’re at it...what about the nation itself? Surely there were more powerful armies and more known civilizations at the time. Why not one of them? I’m telling you, it’s malpractice, if you ask me. But I am glad I wasn’t asked.

I guess God’s unexpected choices continue all down the lane and the line of history...right to you and to me. We don’t have any right to expect or demand God’s attention any more than the shepherds, or Mary or anyone else. And yet, here we are...chosen over and over again as God’s beloved. Here we are chosen over and over again as the messengers of hope, of grace, of mercy, and of love. Some days I feel like THAT’S malpractice, too! Surely there are people who are more qualified. Funny thing is: God still doesn’t ask me. And I’m still really glad about that.

The whole thing is so unexpected! But it worked! Last night we sang praises and celebrated the fact that God, who was once far away, is now very near. What do you know? The first part of the plan worked. Everyone now knows about the baby born in Bethlehem! I wonder if the second part of the plan...the plan that involves you and me sharing and showing this great love with the world... will be quite as successful. I know I haven’t been asked but Grace Church...I’m pretty confident.

Merry Christmas, friends. May you experience God’s unexpected grace and love today and every day.

The Rev. Jason Schwartzman is pastor of this crazy and unexpected Grace Upon Grace Parish – Grace UMC, Harrisburg, and Grace UMC, Lemoyne, in the Susquehanna Annual Conference.



PHOTO: JIM WHETSTONE