

An Advent Devotional

Central UMC

2024



*Construction paper collage titled "The Nativity";
Submitted by Tyler Woldford*

Matthew 2:1-12; The Visit of the Magi
Submitted by Rev. Mark Marino

The basic story is familiar. Many early Christians believed that the Messiah was not for them alone, but was for the whole world. In Matthew's Gospel, learned people from a distant land came to Jerusalem looking for The One who was to embody that full presence of God for all peoples everywhere. The visit by those outsiders aroused fear in the leaders there and all who were with them. The visit threatened those who believed themselves to be privileged and set apart by God.

Fear and suspicion were so deep that in the verses that follow this passage, a slaughter of innocents took place in an attempt to maintain control and ease troubled minds. Thankfully, the Magi resisted, and God's will for that moment was fulfilled.

The story of the Magi speaks of a God who has created and undergirds a diverse world and longs for all in it to be included equally and equitably. Some forces in that long-ago day denied that holy longing. There are forces that deny it today. The Magi resisted, lived and modeled otherwise in their day. May we likewise resist, live and model otherwise in ours today.

Prayer: In the midst of the world around us gripped by war, captivity, greed, and broken relationships, may we live as those who have glimpsed the fullness of God's yearnings in Jesus Christ. May the radiant beams from the wondrous star of that silent and holy night so long ago embolden us today to live and model God's redeeming grace as a reality already present and at work in and through Christ our Savior. (Adapted from Ruth C. Duck)

Advent Challenge 2024: Silent Night

Submitted by Barbara Parcells

Isaiah 9:2-3

“The people walking in the darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.”

My dad was born at 12:03 Christmas morning. His name was Joseph. I always thought that was significant in itself. When I was a little girl, I would always tease him and call him our Christmas Baby which made him smile.

My dad passed away in 1991 just a week before Christmas. Since then my sister and I have vowed that, no matter where we are, we will stay up until 12:03 on Christmas morning, raise a glass, and toast him for his birthday. I always try to get outside, weather permitting, or at least open a window, and look for the brightest star in the sky. Then at the appropriate moment, I lift my glass and whisper, “Happy Birthday, Daddy.” Somehow I just know that his essence is in that star, and that he is smiling down on me.

I have to wonder if the shepherds and wise men who followed that bright star on that special night somehow felt the same way. Down deep inside they knew that it wasn't just a star, it was the light of love, hope, peace, and eternal light. It was the first Christmas present.

Maybe we need to follow that light again. Turn off the Christmas music, leave the mess in the kitchen for later, and go outside to find the star. You'll know if it's the right one. You'll feel it in your soul, that feeling of peace, joy, and hope. It's the Christmas present we all need right now.

By the way, Happy Birthday, Daddy.

Silent Night Reflection

Submitted by Diana Gildea

Until I was 40 years old, when I thought of Jesus' birth, I thought about how cool it was that he was born in a barn. I grew up on a type of farm in rural Oregon and love all the animals. I adore the song, "The Little Drummer Boy" and the imagery of the farm animals enjoying the music, delighting in the baby, and pleased with the new little family in the stall next door. When I birthed an infant of my own, my perspective expanded until I could see it all: as a child, a non-human animal, a mother, a parent.

Blessed is the child born this silent night. My mind's eye brings forth a crisp cold evening. The exhalation of the mare hangs in the air. It is a blue-black night, cloudless and with just a hint of a pale moon. The stars are not only visible but bright. Everyone and everything—the air, the people, the cows and mice, the trees—are hushed and expectant. Waiting. The air is as pregnant with possibility as Mary is pregnant with Jesus.

When I had my son, it was not so silent, though it was night. It was two nights to be precise as I labored for 37 hours. There was talking and laughter as the busy business of birthing was at hand. I was an old novice, surrounded by Swedish midwives, doctors, and surgeons. My beloved cut the cord and brought me the news. He whispered in my ear: it's a boy. Just thinking about it brings joyful tears to my heart.

When I was born, it was neither silent nor night. Mom loves to tell the tale. She begins at the very beginning. "You were late, so the doctor said we would induce labor. He told me not to eat anything, but I'd done this before. Having a baby is easy, but it's hard work; so, I had a big breakfast before going to the hospital. They gave me the Pitocin and then you were born and the doctor left. The nurse felt my belly and called the doctor back. She told him, 'I think there's another one in there!' and then Danny was born and I went to my room and had lunch while I watched the Apollo moonshot on the color tv."

The moment of birth is full of promise. Possibility. Potential. What's to come? How will the future unfold? Even before birth, we imagine our child's life. Yet most of what happens in life (our child's or ours) is not in our power.

We must trust in God's plan for us and our loved ones as Mary trusted God's plan when she was told she would have this child. It probably tested her faith in the plan when she settled into a barn stall as the pangs of labor began. No doubt, that was unexpected. My mom wasn't ready for two babies. I neither wanted nor expected a cesarean. Life comes to us as God wills it. We are not in charge. That's worth repeating: We are not in charge. I am only in charge of the choices I make. When my faith is tested, pushed to its limits, I put my power into action and I choose. I choose to have faith anyway. When I'm scared, I question myself. My abilities, my strength, my perseverance, my path, my decision to write a devotional for the first time. I have a choice. To give in to the fear or to have faith anyway.

Choose faith anyway.

“Wonderous Star, Lend thy Light”

Submitted by Rev. Horace King

Matthew 1:18-21 (NRSVUE)

“Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

What to do? Joseph had been told that Mary was expecting— and they aren't even married!

Thank God for angels! One came to Joseph in a dream, telling him not to be afraid, for this child is given by the holy Spirit! Joseph named the child Jesus, the Savior.

Prayer:

Sometimes the world has called us Wise, and sometimes Royal— but we know who we are, and how prone we are to stumble in the dark alleys of life. We're far from dazzling; and even in our bright moments we admit that our own glory is neither deep nor wide. Fill us with Real lights, we pray, the kind of Light that will not falter for dim. Take the soggy wicks of our charred spirits and rekindle Holy Fire within us! And when we fill with soot, empty us kindly once more near your manger, Loving Child of Light. Amen.

“The Light of Christmas”

Submitted by Pastor Paul

Isaiah 9:2 (NCV)

“Before those people lived in darkness, but now they have seen a great light. They lived in a dark land, but a light has shined on them.”

One of the Christmas Eve traditions Sherri and I built with our kids, Lauren and Morgan, was Christmas Eve lasagna dinner. We would sometimes have a few friends over, and we’d always include the pastor of our church (Park Terrace). We’d then go to Christmas Eve worship. After worship, we’d drive through the community behind the Blue Dolphin (in Apalachin). They seemed to have a light competition and the displays were so “magical” (I can’t believe I used that word!). The kids loved it. When we finally returned home, we’d have snacks by the fireplace and watch the movie, “It’s A Wonderful Life” (Sherri’s favorite).

When I began my role in the ministry, Sherri and the kids would still drive through the lights, but I’d miss them as I was leading worship or cleaning up or something like that. I missed seeing the lights. Even with the kids gone and moved away, Sherri still drives through the lights, but it just isn’t the same.

For me, driving through the lights was an opportunity to see beauty from a different perspective. The lights did add some joy and spirit to this Grinch!

We tend to hear negativity and hate and mistrust and darkness in our news. The lights remind me of the Light that we have available to us— and not just at Christmas time, but at all times. The lights remind me of the goodness in our world, the light that we can all shine to shed the negativity we see. The lights help me to remember that Emmanuel, God with us is truly Emmanuel- God with us!

Let us celebrate the Light and let us always remember Emmanuel— God with us!

Prayer: Holy Light, shine on us and on all people in our world. May all people know the love and beauty that we see when we look through the lens of the Light. Amen.