

2017

Advent Devotions
One Candle Is Lit



Country Club Christian Church

One Candle Is Lit

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

The darkness sometimes overwhelms us. World events and family concerns challenge us. In the midst of the worry and the busyness, “One Candle Is Lit.” This December in worship, we are looking at how God’s light becomes meaningful and real, bringing hope, peace and love to us and the whole world.

The devotions in this booklet have been written by Country Club Christian Church staff, lay leaders and friends for you to use as you prepare for Christmas.

These devotions and others will also appear on the church’s web site at www.cccckc.org and the church’s Facebook page at www.facebook.com/ccckc.

Come, Lord Jesus

I have always found the timing of Advent confusing. I’m not referring to how shoppers and kids count down the days to Santa’s arrival, while the church calls it Advent, and not Christmas until December 25. I can live with that sort of confusion since as Christians we all live what one scholar calls hyphenated lives, living in the world of God’s doing and society’s too. I get that.

No, here’s my confusion. Every year in Advent (the word means coming) we anticipate the birth of Jesus. Wait, what? It’s hardly a news alert to recall that Jesus was born two thousand years ago. How can we be anticipating something in the past? The traditional readings for the four Sundays of Advent don’t make it any easier on us. One Sunday we read of how ancient Israel was awaiting the coming of God’s Messiah, another Sunday we read of how we are awaiting Jesus’ second coming, and all of this swirling around passages about his birth back in Bethlehem. It’s enough to make one’s head spin.

At the heart of the Jewish and Christian faiths there is a marked emphasis on telling time, and it’s always counter-cultural. The earliest story in Genesis describes each day as beginning at sundown, not sunrise. That’s different. And of course there’s the day of rest each Friday into Saturday called Sabbath. While the Christian calendar has morphed over the centuries, we still tell time differently than the culture at large. At a time when most folks are counting down the days until Christmas, followed by festive New Year’s Eve parties, we dare to say that the first Sunday of Advent is the first day of the new year.

Imagine that, the first day of the Christian year is a glorious mix of past, future, and of course, present. “Come, Lord Jesus” is our prayer, even if he already did, and comes again every day.

— Mike Graves

Visit of the Magi

Most commentators agree that the Gospel of Matthew seems to intend to address audiences that are mostly or solely Jewish, perhaps because he has the least association with non-Jewish people than any of the other Gospel writers or he wanted to confront the Jews who had rejected him as a tax collector.

In his Gospel there are many hidden motifs drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures. Let's take a look at the "Visit of the Magi" in Matt. 2:1-12. Magi were wise men and the East was the ancient source of wisdom, even prior to the Hebrew and Greek Cultures.

Matthew does not say that there were three of them. We, along with Christians from the earliest centuries, have assumed so because there were three gifts. Why might Jews assume three? Let's look back at the story of Noah. In Genesis 9-10 we learn that Noah had three sons. If you look up the actual locales of the descendants of these three sons of Noah, you will find that the three sons of Noah are the ancestors of the three most widely known cultures of the post-flood world—the Indo-European, the Semitic and the North African. The three Magi represented these three cultures.

Hopefully, the young child whose star was seen in the East would draw the world's peoples back together.

There are three gifts— gold, frankincense and myrrh. Where do we find these three linked together in Hebrew Scriptures? In Exodus 30, we find that the Altar of Incense in the Tabernacle was covered with pure gold, it was anointed for service with myrrh and that frankincense was burned upon it. The Altar of Incense stands on one side of the transparent curtain that separates the two interior portions of the Tabernacle (i.e. the place where God meets with God's people). This was the closest spot where an ordinary priest could approach the presence of God. On the other side of the curtain was the Ark of the Covenant and above it was the Mercy Seat.

Through their gifts perhaps the Magi were trying to express their hope that Jesus would bring all of the gathered peoples of the world closer to the presence of God. Perhaps Matthew was trying to say to the Jewish people who had rejected him that this Jesus who had accepted him was to do the same for all people.

How has he done it for us? Is he calling for us to offer the closeness of God to all others?

– George Gordon

The Best Christmas

The best Christmas was also the worst Christmas. I was 9 and half months pregnant and expecting Connor's arrival on Dec 26. Wringing my hands about all that still needed to happen before Christmas and childbirth, my husband encouraged me to sit down and write my Sunday sermon. "If you get the sermon finished, he will probably arrive early." And he did. Just a few hours after I printed out the sermon, I landed in the hospital and on Sunday morning, December 17, Connor Harrison Ehman filled our lives with joy. After a few days in the NICU, a healthy baby boy and a thrilled first time mother were chauffeured home by my Mom.

Our home still lacked any signs of Christmas decor but it didn't seem to matter since we had a 7-pound newborn dressed in a red Santa suit. Dave drug home a bedraggled Christmas tree that Charlie Brown would have found too ugly. (I am not proud of my reaction) I have a foggy recollection of aunts and uncles passing through to coo at the baby but I had no energy for company.

Finally on Christmas day, the emotional drain of those days took their toll. I remember about noon my Mom came back into my bedroom in our tiny apartment where I lay on my bed weeping in the darkness. "Carla, are you ok?" she asked. "Yes, I think I am," I said, wiping away the tears. "Maybe I just feel tired and overwhelmed and need a little time alone to rest." I remember her question as a little candle that she lit for me. Comfort, tenderness, compassion, the love that a mother knows when her daughter becomes a mother. It was the year that I cooked nothing, decorated nothing. But it was the best Christmas ever.

– Carla Aday

One Voice

During high school, I was part of a choir that performed One Voice. Like many, music causes me to picture certain imagery or causes emotions to swell within me. I can't explain why, but every time we sang - Just once voice, Singing in the darkness. All it takes is One Voice . . . , the mental image in my mind was that of a single candle burning in a pitch-black space. The music continues to grow and build and speak to there being more than one voice singing when you look around.

As we light one candle this Advent Season, let us be the one voice singing in the darkness – providing a warm meal for a neighbor in need, sharing a friendly smile with the child who has just lost a parent, engaging in productive, civil conversations about caring for refugees from around the world . . . the list of darkness in our world is long. But, if we each let our individual light shine we will soon look around and see a beautifully illuminated world where His will is done on earth as it is in Heaven.

–J. J. Jones

Light in the Darkness

As a child it was our family tradition to see the Charles Dickens play, “A Christmas Carol”, EVERY year with our father on the night of Christmas Eve. It was such a special time, we would get dressed up and scramble to leave the house on time. We were excited to see the play of course, but mostly excited because it meant that Christmas morning was almost here.

As many know the story, there is Scrooge and Tiny Tim and all the adoring characters along the way. The story can be frightening, most of all for young children on Christmas Eve, but the goodness that comes through darkness of seeing the “ghosts” of Christmas past, present and future can be a reminder of our patient waiting for the celebration. There is a lot of darkness in our world, a lot of evil and scary things, and it can be hard to not lose hope, hard to not worry about the future. But we should not be fearful as Christ is our future, he is our light. Light cannot be diminished or imprisoned, Christ's light is our future. “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; a light has dawned on those living in the land of darkness” (Isaiah 9:2).

–Lindsay Howes

Stars

I love clear winter nights when I can get away from the city lights and gaze up into the heavens. You know those nights when the stars beyond the stars are so faint they appear as shimmering dust?

As a farm boy, I am always reminded of those shepherds in our Christmas Eve story. How many nights did they gaze up into the heavens waiting for the Messiah? They knew Isaiah's prophecies of the One who would establish peace and justice. They had also heard the prophets admonish Israel to live into that vision through acts of charity and compassion.

How alike we are – the shepherds and me. I know the prophecy Incarnate in the words and deeds of Jesus. I have also heard Jesus' unequivocal challenge not to sit idle but rather to be a peacemaker and pursue the justice for which we long in His name and power.

My Advent prayer is that one night during this season each of us will glance up at the sky and marvel at God's creation as people have done for generations untold. In that moment of wonder, may the ancient yet always urgent hope for peace in our lives and our world fill our hearts to near bursting and inspire us to renewed and vigorous action.

Look up and see: who created these? God brings out the starry host by number; calls all of them by name. Because of God's great power and might, not one of them is missing. (Isaiah 40:26)

– Joe Walker

Waiting

We were their only grandchildren. My sisters and I were the brightest spots in Mimi's and PawPaw's lives. Every Christmas morning, they would rise long before dawn, dress as if they were going to church, and drive over to our house and wait. They waited in their car for us to wake up and demand to see what Santa had put under the Christmas tree. My parents would signal with the porch light that the fun was about to begin and Mimi's and PawPaw's wait was over.

The ability to wait is an important skill. Life is full of waiting. Waiting for that first shiny new bike. Waiting to graduate and move out of the house. Waiting for the boyfriend to become the fiancé. Waiting for the baby to be born. Waiting for the promotion. Waiting for the diagnosis. Waiting for the cure.

Waiting is at least as old as the stories in the Bible. Elizabeth waited (not very patiently) to become pregnant. The Jews waited for (and then whined about) release from captivity. Mary waited for her special baby. Jesus waited for His time.

God was always there waiting with the people. God still is today. This time of year, we celebrate the birth of that long-awaited-for baby with the assurance that God waits with us for the next chapter in our own stories. In the cloud, in the fire, in the angel Gabriel, and in the porch light, God is there.

Lord of Presence:

Thank you for guidance, companionship and patience.

Amen

Lesley Holt

A Light to Guide Us

When I think about this year's advent theme, I think of the meaningful comforts of seeing a single light or candle lit as one arrives at their destination.

It can be as simple as a lamp in a window or a porch light that establishes you are right where you are supposed to be. It might let you know someone is expecting you and ready to welcome you, or simply a reminder to yourself that you have arrived home.

We of course remember that first light and star the wise men followed. I also envision candles shining in windows throughout history to help guide their loved ones home. Even if the loved ones weren't expected home soon, that glimmering light made sure they knew they were missed and would know where they were going.

I think of years down the road when our young daughter will begin to spend time with family and friends away from home. While she will no doubt know her way home, there will always be a light on for her, no matter how long she is gone. And quite possibly two daddies sitting outside waiting for her!

—Ryan Holmes

Into the Light

Eleven months into my husband's 14-month unemployment, my family was coming undone. My sons grew quiet and retreated. Our marriage was ragged raw. I was scared and angry, especially at God. One evening, I went out onto the dark porch, sprawled flat on the swing, and cradle-rocked myself.

Some place between a fretful prayer and twilight sleep, this happened: I found myself in the waiting room of my childhood dentist's office. From behind the receptionist's window, I heard sawing and hammering and voices calling out to each other. They're building something back there, I thought. Then I noticed a man sitting on a couch near me, leaning forward and watching me closely. He said, "Let's just sit here and talk while we wait. They'll finish putting everything together."

After a bit, I was more alert. I sat up and wondered if I'd had a vision of some sort, but I didn't think that was something that could happen to me. Whatever had happened, I knew the identity of the man and what he'd meant me to understand. I could trust the Spirit's work and wait without fear. I got up and went back inside my house. Into its light.

—Teresa Williams

Light the Candle

When you ask your brother about his favorite Christmas memory from your shared childhood, you end up down a rabbit hole of nostalgia. You discover that his memory is way more vivid than yours, with details like the year you got the Cabbage Patch Kid and he got the Knight Rider Cutoff Challenge car racing set.

He reminds you about cutting down a tree with your dad each year, and about the Christmas morning you got up while it was still dark and sat whispering and giggling together on the hearth, trying not to wake your parents or touch the filled stockings.

He remembers a candle, one your mom never lit but brought out each year with the Christmas decorations. It was dark purple, berry scented with maybe a hint of pine, he recalls. *I've tried my entire adult life to find a candle with that scent*, he tells you, *but even if I ever found it, it probably wouldn't smell the same*. You remember the smells and sounds and tastes signifying the coming of Christmas.

And you wonder together why that one candle was never lit, and why there is so much magic in those memories. The anticipation, the preparation, the excitement. And too soon your trip down memory lane is over, and life in the present beckons. There are deadlines to meet, bills to pay, a new job to find, a scary world to contemplate. But in that moment, you decide that this year for Christmas, you will give your brother one candle, dark purple and smelling of berries if you can find it, with instructions to light it every year.

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

– Lara Schopp

Fear Not

When the Gospel writers finally got around to putting all those stories about Jesus down on paper (ok, papyrus), only two of them bothered to tell of his birth—Matthew and Luke. And what different versions they tell! There is one thing, however, upon which they agree—every time an angel is sent forth to bring a word from God, they begin their speech with the words “Fear not.” You almost get the idea that part of an angel’s basic training includes instructions on how to keep from scaring people to death. “Oh, and before you go, don’t forget she’s only a young teenager. Be sure to start with ‘Fear not.’ Here, try your speech out on me. I’ll be Mary. Remember, begin with ‘Fear not’.”

That is sound advice, of course, since angelic encounters most certainly were frightening experiences. Frederick Buechner, in his novel *On the Road with the Archangel* describes the various angelic encounters with those saints and sinners over the years but from the perspective of the angel:

What they saw of me was about as much as a child’s hand can hold of the sea, but it was enough. A fire burned before them like no other fire. A fragrance fresher than the roses of Sharon filled the air, and the leaves of the trees tossed like plumes though there was no wind stirring. There was the sound of as many voices singing as there are stars in the sky. There was a silence deeper than the deepest well.

Their wonder was so great that they . . . hid their faces in their hands. . . . “Don’t be afraid,” I told them, and when finally they took their hands from their faces, I was gone.

Mary is told not to be afraid, even though she has every right to be scared out of her wits. She is young, inexperienced, a mere child according to most scholars. And here she is, about to conceive God’s own son in her womb. “Don’t be afraid, Mary.” Yeah, right!

Two thousand years later there is still plenty to be petrified of in this crazy world in which we live. The list is predictable. In middle-class America we might think of losing our jobs, the cost of college, a marriage headed downhill, health issues and so forth. Or if we’re thinking bigger picture, various global hot spots come to mind, along with millions of children dying every day from starvation. “Don’t be afraid.” Yeah, right!

It helps, of course, to remember that the name Jesus means “God saves.” It also helps to remember that Mary is not the only one to find favor with God. May this season of Advent find you experiencing the blessings of God, with whom you, too, have found favor. And may you not be afraid. Shalom.

– Mike Graves

No One Leaves Here Empty Handed

The day after Thanksgiving, my mom, Scott and I piled in the car on a mission to visit as many antique stores as possible. (We leave the big box stores to braver souls.)

We found our way to a new little antique store not too far from home and quickly realized we were going to get in to a fair amount of “trouble” that manifested itself in the form of vintage tins and antique glass ornaments. As we were collecting our treasures to leave, the shop owner said to Scott, “No one leaves here empty handed, sir. Please pick out a homemade candle to take home with our compliments.” After the kind woman explained to Scott that she had hand-dipped each scented candle and they were “made with love,” he carefully picked out a little Christmas tree-shaped candle. We hauled out bags upon bags of breakables and the little paper sack filled of pine-scented love.

Earlier this week, as I was finishing putting out the last of the holiday decorations, I came across the bag with the “winter pine” scented candle in it. I couldn’t help but smile as I lit it and placed it in the living room. It was a simple reminder to me of the shop owner and her infectious generosity of spirit. I reflected on how I might be able to offer God’s love to strangers this holiday, so that “no one leaves here empty-handed.” That shop owner may never know the impact of her small gift, but I pray that it will be a constant reminder to me to share God’s love with a world that so desperately needs it.

– Lauren Weinhold

Chop Wood

When I was in elementary school we lived for a year in a big old farm house that was heated by a wood stove.

That Autumn was spent preparing for the arctic blasts we knew would come. We split and stacked wood. We rounded up blankets and quilts. We arranged bed rolls around the stove. We let the faucets drip. We brought the dogs in because they can keep your feet warm!

Sure, a few nights that winter we were a little too cold to be comfortable. But you can’t control the weather. And we loved that old farm house. So, confident that we had prepared as best we could, we wrapped up in blankets and enjoyed the Ozarks glistening under each fresh snowfall.

Years later, it occurred to me that Autumn of preparation had been a very practical metaphor for the Advent season.

Sure, we pray for God’s perfect peace to reign in all hearts and in the world, but that timing is in God’s hands. In the meantime, we can’t control how other people choose to act toward one another. But there is much that we can do – are called by Jesus to do – to take care of one another as we wait in hope for that Spring thaw that we know will come someday.

– Joe Walker

Time in the Darkness

The seasons in my life that I most associate with waiting were my three pregnancies. On learning that I was expecting my first son, my husband and I felt intense joy and excitement. Our lives were about to change and we were nervous, but we believed we could handle it. We were so thrilled that we gift wrapped the results of the pregnancy test and gave them to our parents for Christmas. Everyone was overjoyed.

When I learned about our unplanned third pregnancy, I cursed, my eyes filled with tears and I didn't share the news with my husband right away. When I finally did tell him, we didn't speak for three days. Our other children were just 3 years old and 1 year old and this was definitely not the plan. Parenthood was kicking our butts. We were in survival mode and our family of four seemed barely manageable. That whole pregnancy felt tinged with negativity and I felt extremely guilty that I wasn't enjoying this incredible blessing.

I think of Mary, a pregnant, single teenager and wonder how she must have felt when the angel came with that news. How did she tell her parents? Her partner? Did she cry? Was she terrified? The responsibility of raising another human being is overwhelming enough, can you imagine the pressure of raising the son of God?

Of course our situations couldn't have been more different, but for me, those nine months of anticipating the birth of a child that I didn't feel prepared to raise exposed my weakness and forced me to wait on God. And of course God showed up and wrecked my world for a while, only to help me rebuild it with new skills that I would have never had if I hadn't spent some time in the darkness.

– Leslie Tenjack

Christmas Green

Poet and Mizzou Professor Scott Cairns reminds me in his poem “Christmas Green”^{*} that Christmas offers us the chance to become new. He describes the birth of the baby Jesus like this:

“Just now the earth recalls His stunning visitation. Now the earth and scattered habitants attend to what is possible. That He of a morning entered this, our meagered circumstance, and so relit the fuse igniting life in them, igniting life in all the dim surround”

Though the word “meagered” does not appear in my English dictionary, we all know that our meagered circumstance is real: infertility for the newlyweds; Christmas day without the kids at home; the first holiday without Grandma; you fill in the blank. Our meagered circumstance appears in the news headlines each day: political leaders with no moral compass, refugees turned away at borders; racism that is so ingrained in us we can't see it.

It is into this meagered circumstance that Jesus is born. And he is not born in a stable this year. He is born in us, igniting life in us and all our dim surround. His life reveals that God is born in human flesh, even ours. It is enough to make us sing. On Christmas Eve, you and I will light one candle and sing this promise of God.

– Carla Aday

**From Compass of Affection*