

AMONG *US*

ADVENT 2017

AMONG US

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us...

John 1:14

For many, Christmas is a season spent among family and friends. We plan our calendars around Christmas parties, fellowships and family meals. We offer gifts of love and appreciation. We come together for beautiful worship services and Christmas concerts to proclaim that in the birth of Jesus, God dwells *Among Us*. Indeed, this is the meaning of Christmas!

In the first verses of the New Testament (Matthew 1), an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph and announced that Mary, his fiancé, would bear a Son. They would call Him, *Immanuel*, which means *God with us*. Likewise, the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary announcing that she would bear a holy Child that would be called the Son of God (Luke 1). Finally, the Gospel of John begins with the announcement that the Word was God and that the Word dwelt *Among Us* (John 1).

In the person of Jesus Christ, God is *Among Us*! This is the Good News of Christmas! And so, each day of Advent we will consider the magnificent implications of this truth: In Jesus Christ, the *Peace, Hope, Joy, Love* and *Light* of God is *Among Us*!

Christmas is the season of being among those we love and care for. As you make your holiday plans, I invite you to welcome the presence of God. And in so doing, may you experience the *Peace, Hope, Joy, Love* and *Light* of God among you and your loved ones.

This devotion guide is a gift from First Baptist Norman. The members of our church wrote its pages as they reflected on the miracle of God *Among Us*. It is our invitation for you to prepare for Christmas and to experience the presence of God in your life. Prepare by meditating on these personal stories and Scriptures. Prepare through quiet waiting. Prepare by attentive watching. Prepare through diligent seeking.

Will the presence of God dwell *Among Us* this Christmas? Let us make our preparations. Let us welcome God *Among Us*!

Jesus is Born!

*The Peace, Hope, Joy, Love and Light
of God is Among Us!*

Dr. Wade E. Smith

AMONG US ...Gifts

Christmas is the season of giving gifts. In fact, the first Christmas gift was given by God the Father, who gave His only Son, Jesus, to dwell *Among Us*. Thus, the birth of Jesus offers a gift-giving example as we prepare to give gifts this Christmas. In contrast, the clamor and consumerism of culture entices us with countless gift ideas that only cultivate our insatiable materialism. So, what if we chose to give *Among Us* gifts this year?

Among Us gifts remind us that the greatest gifts are not *presents*, but *presence*. *Among Us* gifts build and strengthen families, friendships and relationships. They create opportunities for people to be together. They open doors for deeper relationships. *Among Us* gifts see the needs of our neighbors and with compassion and generosity meet those needs. *Among Us* gifts say thank you to those who have blessed us. They also can prepare the way for redemption and reconciliation where relationships have been broken. *Among Us* gifts create opportunities for the *Hope, Peace, Joy, Love* and *Light* of God to live and flourish *Among Us*. Let us be thoughtful and creative as we consider the *Among Us* gifts we can offer this year.

What if your gifts prepared the way for someone to know that God dwells with them? Would you consider two special *Among Us* Christmas gifts? First, the need for our missionaries is great. Missionaries live among people of different cultures to share the Good News that God dwells *Among Us*. They often leave family and friends in order to be present in the lives of others. A gift to World Missions through the Lottie Moon and/or Global Missions offerings sustains and opens doors for missionaries to live among the nations (people) of the world. First Baptist's 2017 World Missions goal is \$60,000. Your gift can be designated, given in worship, brought by the church office, or made at fbcnorman.org. How will God lead you to help missionaries dwell among the nations of the world?

Second, our Christmas Eve Candle Lighting service is one of the special services of the year. Join me in bringing a gift for baby Jesus. Bring a package of diapers or baby wipes to symbolize the miracle of His birth. Others may bring a warm blanket or coat for a mother or child to keep warm. Some may bring formula to satisfy the hungry cry of an infant. Allow your special gift to remind others of God's presence and love for them. These gifts will be distributed through our Community Impact Ministries. They will proclaim that God is *Among Us* as we meet the needs of the most vulnerable in our community. Bring a gift to Baby Jesus and place it under the tree on Christmas Eve.

How will your gifts proclaim the *Hope, Peace, Joy, Love* and *Light* of God *Among Us* this Christmas?



THE LIGHT
OF GOD AMONG US

LIGHT IT UP

Lights are a big part of my Christmas. Cruising by my house verifies that! And while my display may appear excessive or unnecessary to some, I trust it's enjoyable to most others.

This is not about competition. If it were, I would be drawn in to the current rivalry between two families from Australia and New York, who for several years have exchanged the Guinness World Record for most holiday lights decorating a residence. Currently, the New York family holds the distinction, using 601,736 lights in their Christmas display. Wow! Good for them! It apparently achieves their goal — being the world's biggest and best, at least for now.

My purpose in lighting up 4104 Beechwood Dr. is not to win, achieve, or claim anything. I do have a purpose, though. To share the Savior's light!

I produce light in a tiny corner of the world, but the awesome, cosmic light emanating from Jesus, as a savior in a manger more than 2,000 years ago, means darkness will never rule anywhere! In 2017 and beyond, disaster, terror, hatred and selfishness still will not triumph. They have been trumped by the light of our Savior, who took our darkness upon Himself in the ultimate self-sacrifice. May you rest in the light of that victory this Christmas — wherever you find it.

FAMILY ACTIVITY

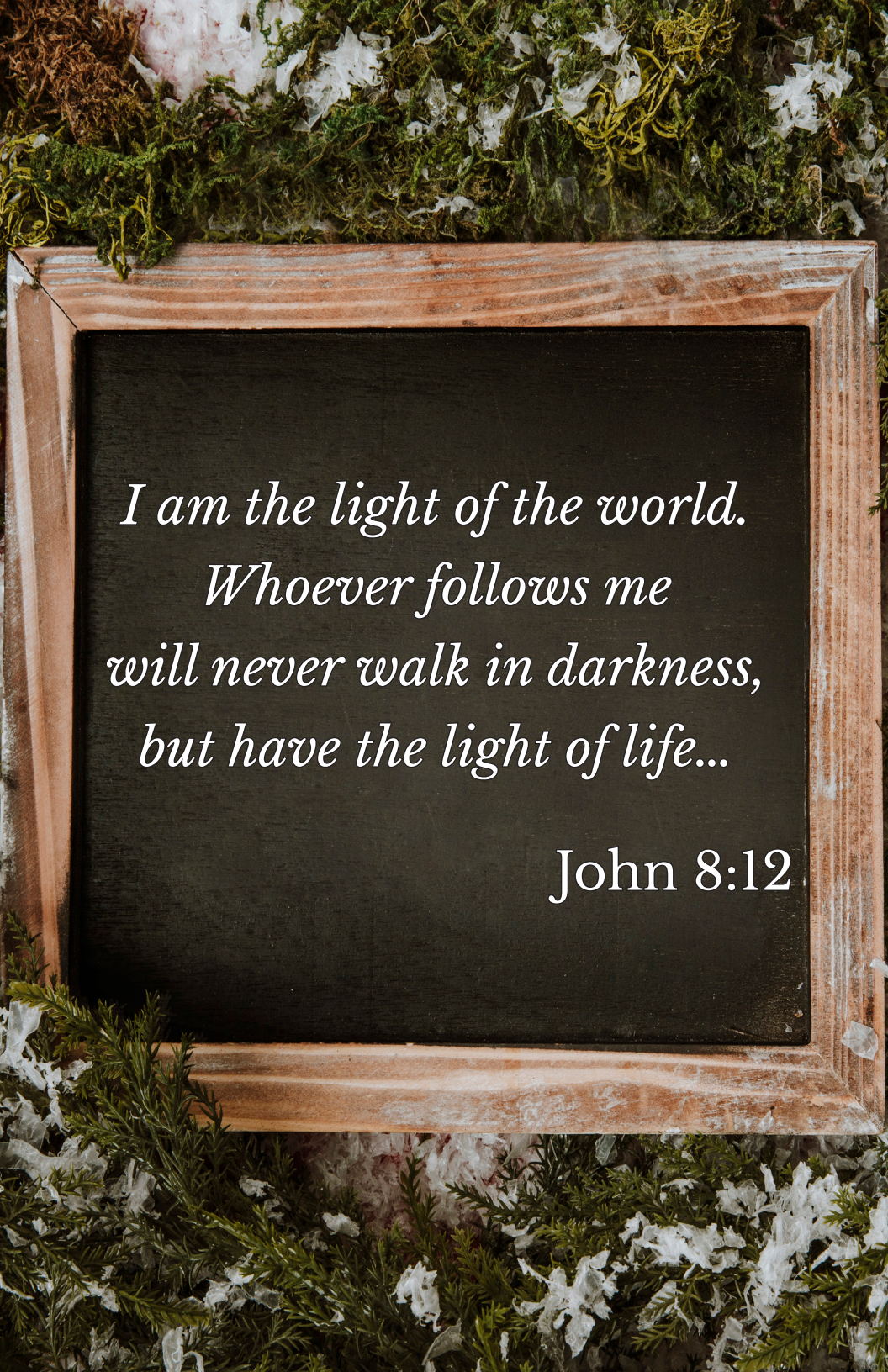
Find ways together to share the light of the Savior. Decorate a tree or house. Hold a family candlelight vigil. Donate your time to light up a cancer patient's home, tree or office.

Your "light sharing" might even come in the form of taking cookies to a shut-in, raking leaves for a widow, or ringing a Salvation Army bell.

My wife likes the tradition of a birthday cake with lighted candles, made in honor of Baby Jesus then singing to Him with our family on Christmas Day.

In this and other ways, you symbolically replace darkness with Christmas light. After all, light is reigning forever! Jesus said so, so light it up!

Jim Stewart



*I am the light of the world.
Whoever follows me
will never walk in darkness,
but have the light of life...*

John 8:12



THE PEACE
OF GOD AMONG US

FAMILY DEVOTION

DEC. 3-DEC.9

In a fast-paced world of activities, jobs, errands, meetings... the list goes on and on... it's easy to lose focus of what keeps us centered and focused — God's peace. In the busyness of life we often forget God's peace can be found in all we do. God's peace is *Among Us*.

As the holiday season approaches, remember to take time to find peace in the birth of Jesus Christ. God sent his Son to be born unto men and bring peace unto all and true peace can only come from God.

Find peace in the glistening of the Christmas lights hanging from houses or the sentimental ornaments hanging from your Christmas tree. Find peace in taking the time to share a cup of coffee or hot chocolate with family or friends.

Most importantly, take time to talk with God daily and find peace in knowing He hears your prayers and cares.

*You will keep him in perfect peace,
whose mind is stayed on
You, because he trusts in You.*

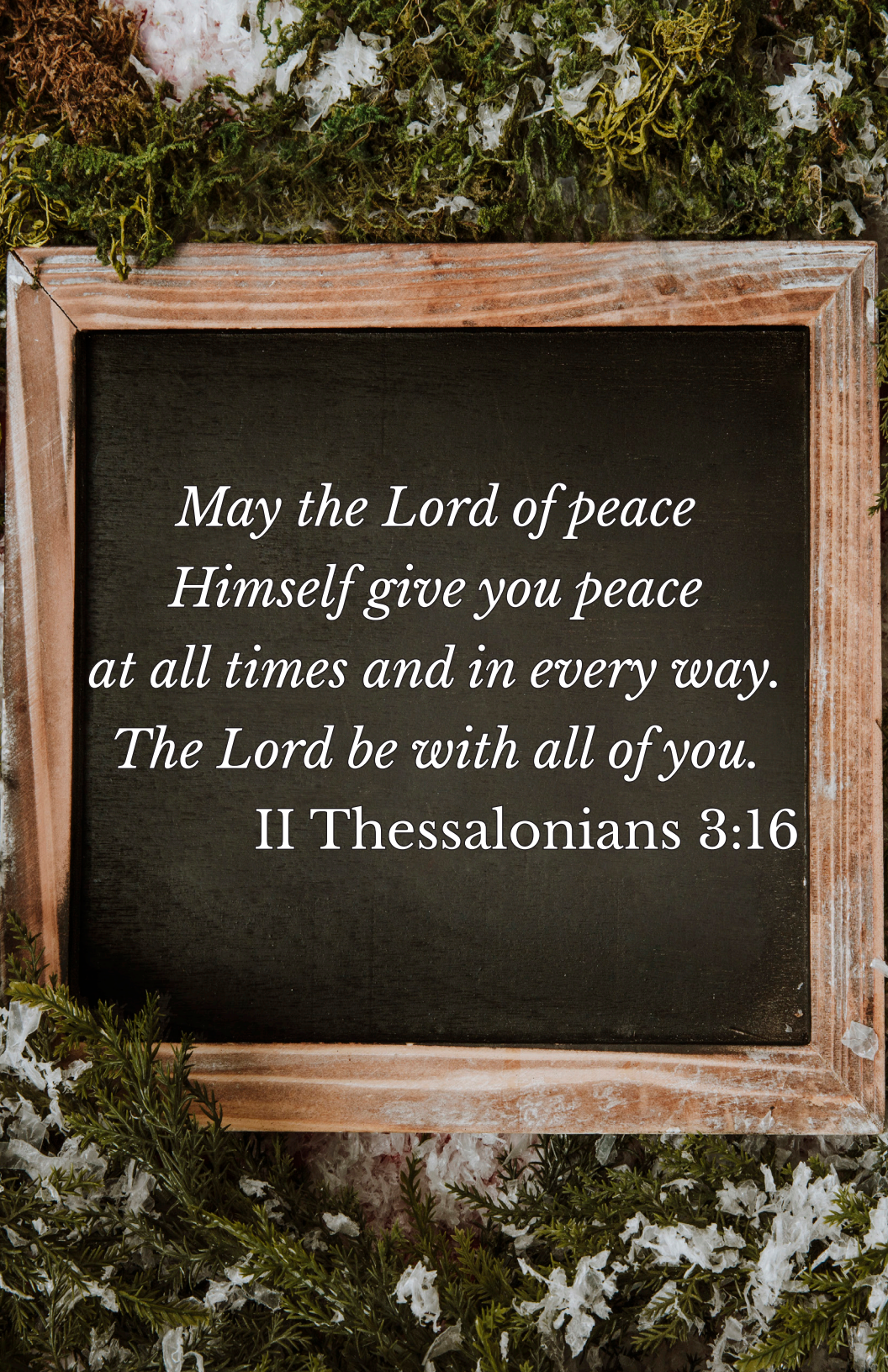
Isaiah 26:3

FAMILY ACTIVITY

Set aside an entire night for your family to enjoy looking at Christmas lights. Make hot chocolate ahead of time and take a Thermos! Enjoy a peaceful night with no distractions.

After enjoying a night of Christmas lights, continue with dinner together as a family. Let God fill you with peace as you soak up quality time with your family.

Adrian Pace



*May the Lord of peace
Himself give you peace
at all times and in every way.
The Lord be with all of you.*

II Thessalonians 3:16

PEACE BEYOND UNDERSTANDING

The Lord is near, Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God that transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Jesus Christ.

Philippians 4:6-7

Several years ago our church began a Community Ministry which included a diversity of programs and ministry areas. One area of ministry was our Friendship Luncheon served every Sunday at noon.

Our first Sunday we had 30 in attendance. It began to slowly grow. When the numbers grew to between 40 and 50 it seemed to plateau. Even though there was no growth, ministry was taking place and lives were being touched. Many times in situations like this one we get caught up with numbers. My team became discouraged. People began to criticize the use of money for the meal. A small crack of negativity appeared and the devil rushed in. Our team visited and had almost decided to discontinue the meal. But then I had an experience like none I had ever known before or since.

At Friendship Luncheon our guests would get in the buffet line and I would walk the line and visit with everyone. As I began to walk the line one particular Sunday I was thinking how it would be a shame if we quit doing this meal. But I was a little bit of a gloomy Gus that day and I thought it was time to stop the meal.

As I started down the line a younger man reached out his hand to shake mine. I looked down at first and noticed his shoes were so worn out that it looked as if he had been walking on the tops of his feet. I also noticed holes and patches on his crumpled clothing. His hair was unkempt and his voice quiet but confident in what he wanted to say to me. As he took my hand he looked me in the eyes and quietly said, "Thank you for having this meal, because I was really getting hungry." I told him I was glad he was there and I walked away.

I immediately asked someone to go grab an emergency food box because I was sure he was homeless. My team quickly got the box but we could not find the young man anywhere. My team member holding the emergency food box said to me, *I think you just looked into the eyes of Jesus.*

I felt a little flushed and a little jittery but at the moment a peaceful reassurance came over me. I don't know for sure who shook my hand that Sunday but someone very dear and special touched my life that day in a way that I will never forget.

DECEMBER 3

Vickie Riggs

AND PEACE ON EARTH

During this season we hear and talk about peace on earth over and over but do we really think about it as a concrete concept? What does *Peace on Earth* really mean? What would that look like? Let's dig a little deeper.

The word peace in Hebrew has different aspects as a noun and is also a verb.

The definition of the verb *Shalom* (Shaw-lam) *To be whole or complete or to live well.*

The word used as a noun is where we see the aspects of peace as well as the aspects of how our God loves us.

Shalom

NOUN

1. Wholeness of body or life (Health)
2. Right relationship or harmony between people
 - a. A covenant of peace
3. Success or fulfillment, prosperity
4. Victory over ones enemies, absence of war.

God wants us to experience His peace in each aspect. His timing is perfect. John 14:27 tells us not to worry. John 16:33 tells us that Jesus has overcome the world. Again, don't worry.

Judges 6:24 tells us that *the Lord IS Peace*. Yahweh Shalom.

2 Thessalonians 3:16 covers all aspects of peace. Given to us by the Lord of peace.

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.

Isaiah 9:6-7 6

Throughout this season of Christmas, please spend time thinking about the different aspects of peace. Ask yourself how this appears in your life each day.

Alicia Turley

Dear God, thank you for sending your Son to be our Prince of Peace. Thank you for thinking about every aspect of our lives and providing that assurance and comfort. We praise you and thank you for your hand in our lives. Amen

DECEMBER 4

PEACE IN NATURE

Every fall as the leaves begin to change color, the tree outside my apartment turns a strikingly beautiful gold. My balcony on the third floor has a perfect view of the tree. When I look out, the sun reflects off the golden leaves to fill my apartment with rich, deep, fall colors.

When I first moved in, the tree was showcasing its beauty, and every year since I take a moment to reflect on what has happened since the last time the tree displayed its bright reds, golds, and yellows.

In those moments of reflection, I feel the peace and tranquility that comes when the Spirit of God is upon us. God's creation is a wonderful reminder of His presence *Among Us*.

Ever since I was a young girl, I turned to nature to find peace and guidance. As a child in Houston, I remember looking out my bedroom window talking to the trees in our backyard, thinking that a small breeze was their response to me.

Every summer, I went to church camps nestled in a forest or the mountains, and I began to associate the beauty of nature with a time of reflection and peace with God.

The day before I left to live in France for a year, I spent time sitting by a river in my hometown with a journal and my Bible to pray, reflect, and seek peace for this new journey.

The day before I returned back home, I sought out time to reflect along the Seine River in Paris about my experience and how God had worked in my life during that journey. Still today, I find myself seeking out hikes, parks, and rivers whenever I need a reflective moment, or to seek out some peace.

As we encounter different forms of nature during this winter season and bring a piece of nature into our homes in the form of Christmas trees, wreaths, or firewood, we can all use the nature we experience and encounter as a reminder that God is living *Among Us*, and of the peace He can bring. As I look out to the beautiful fall tree by my apartment, I am reminded of God's faithfulness and his peaceful presence *Among Us*.

Stephanie Hixon

*The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.*

Psalm 19:1

DECEMBER 5

PERFECT PEACE

...And He shall be called ... The Prince of Peace.

Isaiah 9:6

Sooner Magic. Do you remember it? Some of you do, some don't. So let me get you caught up.

In the 70s and 80s the Sooners dominated college football. Three national championships, almost every Big 8 championship, a Heisman trophy and countless All-Americans. What was magic about the program was that no matter what the score was going into the fourth quarter, everyone in the stands, fans and opponents alike, knew that the Sooners would find a way to win it. And they did. That was Sooner Magic.

It's not my intent to trivialize the Lord's work, but there is a lesson here for us all. When we allow our Lord Jesus into our hearts we receive a Godly Peace within us, *a peace that passes all understanding* (Philippians 4:7). Is this peace permanent? Of course it is. Do you always feel it? No, you don't. And why is that? I believe it's because activating that peace is a choice. It's all about focus. As one approached the stadium his or her focus was on the game. And nothing got in the way of that focus.

During this wonderful season of the year it is so easy to let that focus, that peace, sit on a shelf while we go about our stress-filled business. Wouldn't it be great to wade into the holiday madness enjoying that wonderful peace that dwells within us? The good news is that you can have it. And all you need to do is to decide you want it and focus on it.

Martha didn't understand that. Mary did. You can read about them in Luke 10:38-42. It's all about focusing on what really matters. The choice is yours. God's Peace is truly *Among Us* at all times. All we have to do is tap into it.

Doug Upchurch

*The virgin will be with child and will give
birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel...
God with us.*

Matthew 1:23

DECEMBER 6

SEEK HIM

Be still, and know that I am God...

Psalm 46:10

My younger self used to get so frustrated at this verse. How could I be still and not just fall asleep? I was often so sleep-deprived that any moment of stillness would cause me to fall asleep.

I have since learned that this verse is deeper than that. In a world where our schedules are cram-packed, whether forcibly due to work or family, or by choice to avoid confronting pain or loneliness, it is often easier to jump from one task to the next and not think anything of it. This one-step-at-a-time mindset helps us get through our days with items checked off of our endless to-do lists, but often leaves us stressed and frustrated.

Now I know that instead of commanding me to be physically still and risk falling asleep, I am being asked to quiet my mind. Re-focus. Take two minutes in the shower, the car, or any moment alone, to just stop, pray, and listen. What would God have for me today? How can I be His servant in a chaos-filled world? What is God saying to me about something that is troubling me?

I encourage you to take those few moments to stop, pray, and listen. In those quiet moments, He whispers peace into our hearts and renews us for the coming moments. Just as the wise men and shepherds found Jesus when they sought Him at His birth, so can you.

Jesus lives among us every day. Our God is bigger than any situation we are facing! Seek Him in the stillness of your mind, and you will find Him.

Merry Christmas!
Nancy De Graff

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:6-7

DECEMBER 7

PEACE I GIVE YOU

Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.

James 1: 17

James tells us that God is a giving God, who gives us perfect gifts. Christmas represents a time of God's generosity. God saw clearly the plight of humanities' sin. He then exchanged His own deity, for human flesh, to come to Earth as our Messiah, so that we might receive His gift of salvation (Philippians 2:6,7). In addition to salvation, our beloved Messiah offers us other perfect gifts as well. One of these gifts is the gift of peace; as indicated in the gospel of John:

Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful.

John 14: 27

The word *peace* has many distinctions; and thus, can affect our lives on many different levels. The most notable is that once we were enemies with God, but through the blood of Christ we have been reconciled to God (Romans 5:10); and now have peace with Him.

For me, peace has been a sound guide in decision making. I have never regretted a decision that was made by following the peace in my heart. However, there are plenty of regretted decisions, because I did not follow peace

The Greek scholar, Spiros Zodhiates, gives us the following definition of *Eirene* (Greek for peace): *Peace as a Messianic blessing is the state brought about by the grace and loving mind of God wherein the derangement and distress of life caused by sin are removed.* In spite of our own failures, and in spite of our humanity, God freely makes peace available to us. However, we must choose to receive His peace; and allow it to govern us.

One other notable distinction of peace is that it is transferrable. Scripture tells us: *If the house is worthy, give it your blessing of peace. But if it is not worthy, take back your blessing of peace.* Matthew 10: 13 (NASB).

Christmas can be a time of both stress and tension. This year, first, make a decision to receive Christ's gift of peace. Secondly, share the peace, that is in your heart, with others.

Kell Haworth

DECEMBER 8

MEANING OF PEACE

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.

But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.

*Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible,
the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever.*

1 Timothy 1: 15-17

Christmas can mean many things to many people. For us as a military family it has brought not only some of our best but some of the worst moments in our lives.

Normally we celebrate out of moving boxes or without our things at all. Material possessions never held much in the way of Christmas. The spirit in which we celebrated always meant more. Christ never promised happiness or a life without pain. He, however, did promise Hope and Peace. Sometimes in life peace is something that comes when hope seems lost.

One Christmas for us was particularly hard. We had lost my wife's Grandfather, a surviving POW and amazing man of God. The same week we lost our first child to a miscarriage. The season of Christmas didn't hold peace or hope for us. Breathing seemed like too much of a task for some instants.

It was one of the worst moments and yet when all hope seemed lost we found peace. My wife was up early Christmas morning and said *Seems to me that Grandpa J knew that our little one would need a guide and he simply wouldn't let him go alone.*

Peace in a moment so raw knowing that Christmas meant so much more than what was present. In the years since, Christmas means abundantly more to our family then simply celebrating the birth of our Savior and King. It's the celebration of peace for so many hurting souls through that birth.

In the midst of sorrow, we found the meaning of peace that accompanied Christ to earth that day. The internal peace of knowing that this life is temporary and His life is eternal. He showed us mercy when he came to Earth to share His peace.

Ernie, Jennifer, Galen, and Cowan Chen



THE HOPE
OF GOD AMONG US

FAMILY DEVOTION

DEC. 10-DEC. 16

At the end of the Old Testament, it seems God had abandoned the people of Israel. God promised to send a King, a Son of David who would lead wisely, bring the world back to God, and be an agent of blessing to all peoples of the world.

But the people of Israel stopped listening to God and for many years God seemed silent. The Israelites wondered what God was going to do and how He would fulfill His promise.

The hope of this promise is Jesus Christ.

Though Jesus has already brought about our salvation by His life, death, and resurrection, we hopefully anticipate when He will come again and fulfill His promises.


FAMILY ACTIVITY

Read Isaiah 11:1-2 and Isaiah 9:6-7. Listen and sing the hymn *O Come, O Come Emmanuel*

Put up a manger scene a few pieces a week. When putting out the animals talk about God's love of nature and His creations. As you put up the shepherds and Mary and Joseph, talk about the themes of joy, love and peace.

On Christmas Eve, add baby Jesus to emphasize the hope we have in Him.

Nancy Gardner

A rustic wooden frame with a weathered, light brown finish surrounds a blackboard. The blackboard has a white script quote. The entire composition is set against a background of lush greenery, including moss and small white flowers, with more greenery and white flowers at the bottom.

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

Romans 15:13

HOPE THROUGH LOVE

The year was 1982. I know, an eternity ago. I was a 6th grader and I was just informed that I had a role in our youth choir Christmas musical, *A Miracle Happened at Christmas*. What I didn't know, at the time, was how pivotal a role I was playing.

The entire musical is from the eyes of a young boy. Since I was the youngest boy in our youth group (and could sing a little bit), the part was mine. The pinnacle scene was an encounter between Mr. Crankite (a grumpy old man who had a lot of hurt and loss in his life, broken relationships with family and friends, and had no desire to celebrate Christmas at all), and the boy (me). Mr. Crankite sang, *What's So Merry About Christmas?* He sings:

*What's so merry about Christmas?
What's so happy about the holidays?
Kids coming over, causing a lot of fuss
Making a lot of noise, tearing up all their toys
I hate Christmas! I hate Christmas!*

Then came the encounter, I approached Mr. Crankite, and we talked about all of the reasons he disliked Christmas. Then I sang, *A Loving Time of Year*:

*Christmas is a loving time of year
A time for hate and bitterness to disappear
A time for holding on to friendships dear
A loving time of year
Christmas is a loving time of year
A time for joy and tenderness to reappear
A time for holding on to loved ones dear
A loving time, a healing time, a loving time of year*

I had always known Christmas was about the birth of our Savior, Jesus. At that moment, I realized it was even more than that. It's about family, it's about friends, it's about spending time with those you love. It's not a time for hate, and bitterness, and grudges. Most of all, I learned it's not about me!

This Christmas, you may feel there is no hope, like Mr. Crankite. My prayer for you this season is you find hope through the love of our Lord. If you are broken through relationships, I pray that you can replace the hate and bitterness with joy and tenderness. If you feel hurt, I pray for healing. Instead of saying, *I hate Christmas* I pray that the hope you find will have you saying, *I love Christmas* because Christmas is a loving time of year.

DECEMBER 10

Clint Taylor

WOULD YOU RECOGNIZE HIM?

Luke 24: 13-38 is set on the road to Emmaus on the day Jesus was resurrected. Cleopas was walking with some other disciples and discussing the horrid crucifixion of Jesus. They had heard that Jesus was resurrected but thought it was nonsense.

During their discussion, Jesus appeared and began walking with them but, by God's plan, they didn't recognize him. When Jesus asked, *What are you discussing so intently?* Cleopas said, *You must be the only person in Jerusalem who hasn't heard about all the things that have happened there in the last few days."*

Cleopas told Jesus about the man from Nazareth who was a prophet and worked powerful miracles but was condemned to death and crucified. He continued that they had hoped Jesus was the Messiah who had come to rescue Israel but that hope ended with the crucifixion. Then Jesus said to them, *You foolish people! You find it so hard to believe all that the prophets wrote in the Scriptures. Wasn't it clearly predicted that the Messiah would have to suffer all these things before entering His glory?*

As they were nearing Emmaus, Cleopas and the other one invited Jesus to stay the night with them, still not knowing that Jesus was the One who was crucified. As they sat down to eat, Jesus took the bread and blessed it. Then He broke it and gave it to them. Suddenly, their eyes were opened, and they recognized Him. Jesus then said to them, *Why are you frightened and why are your hearts filled with doubt?*

The last person that these two expected to meet was the man that they saw crucified and buried. They had heard the rumors that the tomb was empty, but still they doubted.

Are we any different than Cleopas and his friend? There are written accounts of His appearances after the resurrection, but do we expect Jesus to walk with us in the things that we face daily? I would guess that these two men are not unique. Has Jesus walked *Among Us* and we not know it? Would we recognize Him? Would He recognize us as His disciples by the way that we act daily?

Too many people probably believe that God does not work in the world today because we have no written account of it since the New Testament. Jesus told us otherwise. Do we look for God in all things? Do we hear the Holy Spirit in our lives? Would we recognize Jesus if He were *Among Us*?

I know He is *Among Us* because I talk with Him every morning and throughout the day, thanking Him for countless blessings and throwing my problems at His feet.

Jim Spearman

DECEMBER 11

HOPE IS ALWAYS AMONG US

I know from personal experience that Christmas isn't always a happy time with your loved ones. Sometimes the ones we love are no longer living. Sometimes they live too far away and travel isn't possible. Sometimes our jobs require us to work holidays. Or, like myself, it could be a combination of all the above. It is during these times that loneliness, and often hopelessness, creep in to steal our joy. These are the times we need to remember that Christ came to earth to give us hope.

The Lord our God loves us so much that He sent Jesus, His only Son, to be our hope, so that through our faith in Him we can look forward to eternal life with the Father. He gave us His Holy Spirit to live within us, to give us hope day by day, minute by minute, second by second if necessary. He knows this world is full of wickedness and sorrow. He wants us to look past it all to the life we will share with Him in heaven.

The Christmas Hope by NewSong

*Hope is a present
A gift freely given
To all who receive
And open their hearts
Hope is a promise
For a better tomorrow
In a world filled with sorrow
We always have hope
Hope is a candle
A light in the window
Showing the way for
A heart to come home
Hope is a Savior
Who was born in the manger
Sent down from Heaven
To rescue our hearts
Our Christmas hope*

Christianne King

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and
peace in believing, so that by the power of the
Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.*

Romans 15:13

DECEMBER 12

A SEASON OF HOPE

*I sought the Lord, and He answered me; He delivered me from all my fears...
The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those
who are crushed in Spirit.*

Psalms 34:18

One of the hardest things in a person's life is to lose a loved one. For a season all seems lost, heartbreak and loneliness are in control. The Christmas season especially is a difficult one. But knowing God is there for us gives us hope.

When bad things happen, God feels our pain, He is present with us and works to give us comfort in difficult times. Family members gathering and remembering the past asking why and not understanding. There is a lot of pain and suffering in the world, so it is important to understand God's presence and influence in the face of a difficult time.

While the loved one will always be missed, our faith in Jesus gives us not only the hope but assurance we will see them again.

Our future after this kind of loss can seem bleak, but God always has a plan. He provides us new beginnings, as He draws us closer to Him.

The true meaning of Christmas replaces our heartache and sorrows with the joy of the story of baby Jesus being sent by God to redeem us all from our sins and give us abundant life.

Looking back on many Christmases, there is truly a spirit of joy, hope, even peace among enemies, if only for a day. Is this not God telling us and the world that Jesus is Lord of all?

Larry Gardner and Cathey Brownlow

*Now faith is confidence in what we hope for
and assurance about what we do not see.*

Hebrews 11:1

DECEMBER 13

PREPARE OUR HEARTS

Webster's dictionary defines hope as: *to cherish a desire with anticipation: to want something to happen or be true*. That is our hope for God *Among Us* now and as it was so many years ago.

In Isaiah 53 and Micah 5, written in the late 700 or early 600s B.C., they made a prophecy that a Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. The Israelites had hope for all those ensuing years that the prophecy would be fulfilled and they would have *God Among Them*. We celebrate the fulfillment of that prophecy at this time of Christmas.

Now we have hope that the promise that Christ made during His time on earth, among His believers, that he would return one day to establish His kingdom

*Now faith is confidence in what we hope for
and assurance about what we do not see.*

*As believing Christians we have faith
that our hope will be fulfilled.*

Romans 11:1

Today's world is much like the Christ followers were experiencing in His day. The Israelites were suffering under Roman and non-believing Jewish leadership persecution. Today Christians in many areas of the world are dealing with those same persecutions. We have shootings in schools and churches. Mass murder in Las Vegas and other atrocities for no apparent reason. Recently, we experienced hurricanes, tornadoes, massive fires, and earthquakes around the world. We don't always understand and our hope is challenged but as Christians our faith sustains us.

In our prayer time on Sunday morning before the service, one of us will usually ask that the congregation and our visitors feel the Lord's presence *Among Us*. That doesn't always occur with everyone, me included. We routinely come to church on Sunday, to study the word, listen to the sermon, and go home without ever feeling that God was *Among Us*. On Christmas Eve and Easter I think many of us feel the presence of the Lord. It is a special time and we have prepared to experience the presence of God. That is a very special feeling and we need to make that an every Sunday thing.

The Lord has promised where two or more gather in my name there I will be also. In John 14:16 he says, *I will ask the Father, and he will give you a counselor to be with you forever. He promised to have the Holy Spirit with us*. We just have to prepare to feel the presence of God *Among Us*.

DECEMBER 14

Chuck Gage

BRING US TOGETHER

Now you have every grace and blessing; every spiritual gift and power for doing His will and yours during this time of waiting for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 1:7

We are not world travelers, but my husband and I have traveled to every state including Alaska and Hawaii as well as many areas of Europe. It seldom failed, we would run into someone at an airport that we knew or they were from where we lived at the time. We always said, *It's a small world after all.*

Today, most of our lengthy travels are behind us and we look closer to those who live around us. Who are our neighbors? They exist in the large houses, set far apart on the commanding hill or the small houses around the corner. If they need or want us, if we might enjoy each other, we don't know it. We and some of our neighbors are afraid to go seeking each other lest we intrude.

Some in the neighborhood cluster close, some too close for comfort up and down the street. We see them coming and going, puzzled and unsure. Only a wave as they walk and talk into their cellphones. They don't want to be gobbled up in an empty greeting from those of us who would like to know them.

Yet, aren't we hungry for true neighbors whom we depend on and who can depend on us? We all long for our neighbors occasional companionship, for their understanding and for their knowledge as well as their willingness to share joys and sorrow.

We need God's help to know who are truly neighbors, bringing us together so we can help each other in timeless ways neighbors need to do. It is a wonderful feeling for the times in life when suddenly we feel His uniting us with other people, the young or those standing on the sidelines of life.

God is *Among Us*, trying to unite us. Revealing us to each other in a new dimension. Giving us understanding. We are all brothers and sisters, Christians needing and wanting each other.

Especially during this Christmas season, do no fear of attempting to make friends with your neighbors. They may not only need a friend but a church home. Faith in our family, friends and neighbors is one of the most precious gifts God has given us.

Why not drop a short Christmas message with your name, address and phone number in your neighbors' mailbox. It just might open the door to a wonderful friendship, a gift.

Dot Adkins

DECEMBER 15

COME BACK

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 1:14

Alan Conner came to me in the middle-of-the-night in an OU fraternity house bathroom that I was mopping. I was a lowly freshman pledge back in the days when hazing — mental as well as physical — was part and parcel of the *best* frat house pledge programs.

Alan approached me on a wild night before a big Sooner home football game during a national championship season. He did so amidst many scoffers and mockers, including myself, who referred to him behind his back — and sometimes not behind his back — as a *God Squadder* and *Jesus Freak*. What a cool guy I used to think he was while I was growing up. He was the tanned, reflector shade-sporting lifeguard at our swimming pool in Duncan, and a totally ripped state champion wrestler. Too bad that now he was a goofy religious fanatic.

John, did you know that you can have a personal relationship with Jesus? Alan asked hungover me as I swabbed out a urinal at 3 a.m. Despite having grown up in buckle of the Bible Belt, Oklahoma, it was the first time in my life I consciously remember someone personally posing that all-important question to me. I could barely stifle a snicker long enough to answer, *No, I didn't.*

It was still a long time before I bowed my knee to Christ, but that was a beginning of sorts. Now I knew there was an important question to which I did not have a decent answer. How long until I would have known that, had Alan not decided to live out his faith through word and deed in the Delta Tau Delta house that senior year of his, amidst scores of wild, profane, beer drinking, skirt chasing college boys like John Dwyer? He had plenty of other living options amidst well-mannered fellow Christians.

The United States Coast Guard lives by its famed motto, *You have to go out, but you don't have to come back.* Alan Conner, now the longtime pastor of Northwest Bible Church in OKC, went out, and the world is not the same because of the impact of the many guys that he impacted. Yes, you and I should pray, go to church, love good, hate evil, and read our Bibles. Jesus did all that, but He also went out and dwelt *Among Us*.

This coming year, let's you and I seek God's will on whom we should go out amongst that may have great needs, whom we should spend time with that may be very different from us, and whom we might be highly honored by Him to *come back* with.

John Dwyer

DECEMBER 16



THE JOY
OF GOD AMONG US

FAMILY DEVOTION

DEC. 17-DEC. 23

In reading through the Christmas story, joy is a thread that runs throughout. Starting with Mary and her cousin, Elizabeth, we find that the baby in Elizabeth's womb *leaped with joy* (Luke 1:44). Mary writes a beautiful song that shares her joy after receiving the news that she would bear a child — the Savior of the world (Luke 1:46-55). After Jesus birth, the angels brought the news to the shepherds by saying, *I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people!* (Luke 2:10) The three kings in Matthew 2:10-12 were overjoyed when they saw the star and followed it to the place of Jesus birth!

Our Savior is our joy! God sent Him to earth to offer a salvation for everyone.

If you have the joy of Jesus how are you sharing it with those around you? Are you a happy Christian? Do you find joy in worship, reading the Bible or prayer?


FAMILY ACTIVITY

Joy is not found in possessions, what we do, or others. We can find joy in God's goodness and presence. We can be joyful in all circumstances.

Look up and read the following scriptures: Luke 1:44, 1:46-55, Luke 2:10, Matthew 2:11-12. After reading these scriptures answer the following questions: What do all four scriptures have in common? What caused joy for each of these people? Where else in the story of Jesus birth or in another Bible story do you find joy? Is joy the same thing as happiness? What makes you happy? What fills you with joy? If you are lacking joy, how or where can you find it?

Two great ways to bring joy into your house are to take time to worship while you are working. Turn on KLOV or your favorite Christmas CD and fold laundry together, do the dishes or pick up the house while singing.

Find a way to help those around you. By serving, you will find the joy of the Lord by bringing joy into someone else's life! Take a meal to someone hurting, bake cookies and deliver them to a neighbor, make a card for your mail person, send an extra sandwich or dessert with your child in their lunch so that they can share with someone at lunch, ring a bell for the Salvation Army. Slow down this week and look for people that God has put in your life that need to see the joy of the Lord!

A rustic wooden frame with a weathered, light brown finish surrounds a blackboard. The blackboard is filled with white text in a cursive script. The frame is set against a background of lush greenery, including moss and small white flowers, which are visible at the top and bottom edges of the frame.

*Shout for joy to the Lord,
all the earth. Worship
the Lord with gladness;
come before him
with joyful songs.*

Psalm 100: 1-2

MOMENTS OF JOY

A few years ago, as I was finishing up my degree, I learned of the opportunity to visit Israel and Jordan for one of my last classes.

We traveled there in early January during the school's winter break. This was after Christmas but did coincide with orthodox Christmas that year.

I will never forget walking to worship in Bethlehem while the bells rang out from the cathedral to celebrate Christmas with other Christians, all worshiping in the very place where Jesus first came to dwell *Among Us*. It was a joyful, powerful, and amazing morning.

We worshiped together with Christians from Bethlehem as well as other guests from around the world. I didn't always understand the words of the songs or the priest's message, yet I was always aware of being a part of this group of believers and the Holy Spirit with us there in that place.

Similarly, it brings me great joy to participate in our own Christmas Eve service as we join together with families and friends to celebrate the wonder, beauty, and joy of Christ's birth through singing together and the amazing passage of candlelight throughout the room.

Besides the beauty of the candles in the room, to me it also symbolizes the light of Christ — His joy, grace and love — spreading from person to person to light a dark world and making it beautiful again as He created it to be. He is here with us always, but in moments like these, He seems to be just a bit closer, just a bit more *Among Us*.

As you think on Christ's birth this season, remember that He came to dwell here on earth to be closer to us, to bring us His own gift of salvation and light for a dark world. Continue to lean into the joyful moments surrounding you this season.

Angela Atkins

THEIR SACRIFICES

As we enter the midst of holiday hustle and bustle, we are given an annual opportunity to share in a unique and joyous experience with followers of Jesus, and others alike.

Almost everywhere one looks, people are in seasonal spirit, looking to have enriching time with their close loved ones, as well as share with others in need. How good it is to see a healthy environment for nurturing joy, and seeing it spread! The sights, sounds, smells, and of course tastes of Christmas may vary across cultures, but for those with backgrounds that celebrate this season, there is something exciting to bring to the table of tradition.

I may not know about each of your stories, but in the home of my youth the table of tradition was a literal table of baked, roasted, fried, and broiled goods. These delicious things were expertly prepared with experience, time, work, and love, and although the product of hard labor, facilitated joy for each person sitting at that same table.

The expectation of this joy was at times associated with the work of a man, whether my Uncle Charles' broccoli rice casserole, or my Uncle Dallas' fried turkey, but all in all, the contributions to the table that were most significant were those of a woman.

In the second chapter of his gospel, Luke, starting at v.46 writes,

*And Mary said: My soul exalts the Lord,
And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.
For He has had regard for the humble state of
His bondservant; For behold, from this time on all
generations will count me as blessed.*

When I read these verses of Mary's song while Jesus developed in her womb, I can't help but think: How great is our God to choose a woman to bless the world forever in a way that only a woman can!

The joy of this season, of God *Among Us*, began with the faithfulness of God expressed through the faithfulness of the labor of womankind. In honor of this memory, let us today take joy in thanking women and their many sacrifices, and in turn honor the Lord whose image they so gracefully bear.

Amen Holman

DECEMBER 18

FEAR NOT

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord.'

Luke 2: 8-11

We can all remember the excitement and anticipation of Christmas morning as a young child. What will be in my stocking? Will I get that toy I wanted? How many packages are for me? I hope that big present with the big red bow is for me! Oh, I can't wait! This is going to be so great!

Isn't it interesting how children can find so much joy in anticipation of something that is so uncertain? Yet as adults we often find moments or periods of life with uncertainty as scary or worrisome. Just as the shepherds were terrified by an angel suddenly appearing to them and the glory of God shining around them, we are also intimidated by things that catch us by surprise or do not go as we expect.

The angel told the shepherds to not be afraid, because the reason for the visit was to bring good news of great joy. How often do we have to be told to be joyful rather than just experience the joy of anticipation of great things that can come from those periods of ambiguity? Many of our greatest gifts from God are brought in surprising ways or during times when we least expected.

During this season I challenge you to look for the joy that can be experienced in the many moments of uncertainty, surprise, change, and/or ambiguity. Wouldn't it be great to experience the season with the joyful amazement and wonder of a child in anticipation of great things to come?

Amy Cherry

DECEMBER 19

JOY TO THE WORLD, THE LORD HAS COME

This time of year we talk a lot about joy. Interesting, joy it seems, is not so easy at Christmas or even other times of the year. What is joy? Joy is not a verb, or an adjective, it is a noun. A noun is a word that functions as the name of some specific thing. Just knowing this caused me to think.

Nehemiah, during a time of national crisis and rejection, wrote *The joy of the Lord is my strength* (Nehemiah 8:10). Then there was Paul, while in prison, (for sharing the Good News no less) who wrote an entire letter to the Phillipians about joy. John, later in his life, wrote for this purpose, *And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.* 1 John 1:4 (NKJV)

Can I share what I have learned? The birth of a daughter with special needs, the loss of a marriage, breast cancer, and more recently the termination of a 21 year career has certainly caused me to dig into the scripture and pray a lot searching for answers. Circumstances made a strong surge to rob me of my joy. This simple acronym is what I have learned

J — Jesus First
O — Others second
Y — Yourself last

Simple, but profound.

All of the men mentioned above had a crisis in their belief, they each taught this acronym and applied it to their lives during very difficult circumstances, but more importantly Jesus teaches us these same principles, both in His actions and His words.

Father, remind us that joy is a fruit of the Spirit and You desire for Your children to walk in joy. Remind us that the joy of the Lord is our strength.

Jane Kroeker

DECEMBER 20

NEW SEASON

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.

Romans 12:12

I grew up at First Baptist, Norman, but moved away for college. After college, I moved all over the US and the world by way of marrying a Marine. After almost 20 years of being gone, my husband, three kids, and I have happily returned.

Last August, while we were living in Kuwait, my beloved grandma, Dean Conerly, passed away. It was extremely difficult to be so far from family and not be able to make the journey home. I thought of all of my family, and especially my granddad, Wallace Conerly. Life is very different in the Middle East, and we felt very far away during our family's loss.

We moved back to Norman this summer, and transferred our membership. When we were standing in front of the church, Brother Wade called my granddad up and had him stand with us. My granddad loves his family and loves First Baptist, and he was thrilled to welcome us back home and help introduce us to the church family.

I realized later that the day we transferred our membership in August was the same day that my grandma had passed away last year. Last year during this time, my family was grieving. This year, we were celebrating.

I don't want to forget this homecoming story. To me, it illustrates how God can take a dark time, carry you through it, and create a new beginning that you never could have dreamed.

Granddad is a very young 90 years old, and he says all the time how he couldn't ask for anything more at 90. He and my grandma had been married for 62 years, and it must be incredibly jarring to continue on by yourself after all of those years of partnership. But God gave my granddad a new beginning, a new season — a season of spending time with his four great-grandkids and finding great joy and purpose in it.

I am joyful in hope this holiday season, and so grateful to be reminded of how we never know how things will turn out, but the Lord does.

Staci Koutsoukos

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

Romans 8:28

DECEMBER 21

WHAT ITS ALL ABOUT

To me, Christmas means family. It means spending time with the ones I love. My family has many Christmas traditions. Some of our traditions include decorating gingerbread houses with Grandma, baking Christmas treats with Mom, and playing *Sleigh Ride* on the piano with my sister.

My favorite thing we do together around this time of year, though, is just sit around the living room and talk. There may be a fire in the fireplace or a football game on TV, and, without fail, there's always something good to eat!

In this time, we get to slow down and hear about each other's lives. We get to hear stories about what Christmas was like for my grandparents when they were growing up. We get to have time together where no one is focused on work or school. In these times with my family, I can clearly see the love that we have for one another, the same love that I believe is what Christmas is all about.

In thinking about Christmas and family I can't help but think of another family. I like to try to imagine what Joseph and Mary felt on the night Jesus was born. I'm sure they were frightened and unsure leading up to Jesus's birth, but I imagine they felt an overwhelming sense of love once they held Christ in their arms.

I love thinking of this sweet family and what it represents. It reminds me that family is such a precious thing. One of my favorite Christmas songs is *Joseph's Lullaby* by MercyMe. If you haven't heard it I highly encourage you to look it up. It conveys what Joseph and Mary must have felt as they reconciled the love they had for their precious baby boy with the knowledge that this baby boy is the Savior of the world!

I'm so grateful for my family, and I'm very thankful that Christmas gives us a reason to come together and remember to act with the love of which Romans 12:10 reminds us. It is in time spent with family that I believe God truly dwells *Among Us*.

Hayley Redwine

*Be devoted to one another in love.
Honor one another above yourselves.*

Romans 12:10

DECEMBER 22

A GLIMPSE

*Who is like unto thee, O Lord, among the gods?
Who is like thee, glorious in holiness,
fearful in praises, doing wonders?*

Exodus 15:11

One of my earliest memories of Christmas was the year my parents presented me with a beautiful King James Bible that included photographs of paintings by Michelangelo, considered the most famous artist of the Italian Renaissance.

In the early 1500s, Michelangelo spent more than four years painting the vaulted 68-foot ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The chapel is approximately 134 by 44 feet in dimension. The paintings were done while the artist laid on his back atop scaffolds.

The paintings on the ceiling depict stories from the Book of Genesis, the most significant being *The Creation of Adam*. The depiction of God's hand extending to Adam, creating life, is one of the most powerful and well known in history. The ceiling also contains scenes of those who prophesied the birth of Jesus. The entire altar, painted 20 years later, is *The Last Judgment*, which shows Jesus Christ ascending to the heavenly throne.

As a young girl, I often studied those paintings while reading the Word of God. At long last, I was privileged to visit the Sistine Chapel when I was 19 years old. I visited again this past October. During both visits, the chapel was packed wall to wall with tourists, all straining their necks to see the visions above. The murmur of voices, speaking in various languages, echoed through the chapel as people shared with others the visual stories of God.

As I took in the magnitude of the work, and reflected on the personal sacrifice the artist made to complete it, I considered our heavenly Father, who loved the world He created so much that He sent his Son to live *Among Us*, loving and teaching us, and dying on the cross for our sins so that we may have eternal life.

Michelangelo's paintings were certainly beautiful and I was happy to have a second look at some of his best work. Repeating that experience has prompted me to pray for those who are still seeking the One who came down to live *Among Us*. Please join me in praying that we all are given a glimpse of the absolute wonder of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, and the glory of what is ahead.

Kim Marks

DECEMBER 23



THE LOVE
OF GOD AMONG US

FAMILY DEVOTION

DEC. 24-DEC. 28

God is love, and love came down to us at Christmas! That is the greatest meaning we have during this time of the year — God showed His love by coming to earth as a baby. Of course, His coming was just the beginning of His earthly ministry, and during His life on earth He showed us who He was, and is, and is to come.

He taught us how to live, and how to be close to Him. His message was that because He loves us, we should share His love (the love we experience) with those around us. That's particularly true when it is the Christmas season — we have an opportunity to share a message of God's love with people whose hearts may be more open because of the time of year.

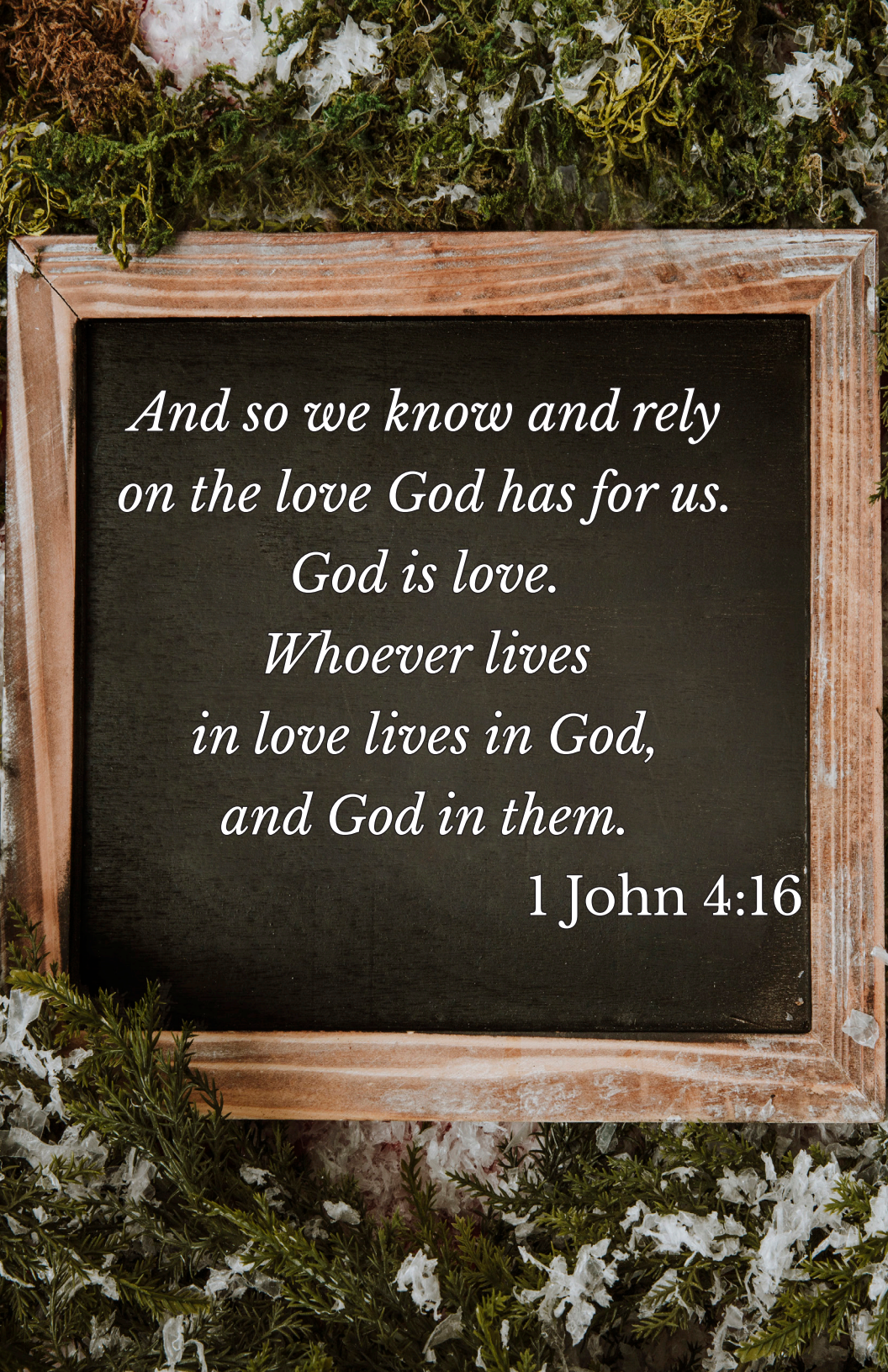
Do you know how flowers get pollinated? Bees pick up the pollen as they travel among the flowers, and the pollen gets spread as they go. As we go about our days, we, too can spread and share God's love with others.

FAMILY ACTIVITY

Put baby powder into a shallow tub. Explain that when bees go from flower to flower for nectar, they spread pollen by picking it up from one flower and then leave pollen prints on the flowers they visit next.

Want to see how that works? Have children (or others!) take off their shoes and socks and step into baby powder in the tub. Once their feet are covered, they can walk or run around to see how their powder footprints spread. Just like a bee spreads pollen everywhere it goes, we can spread God's love everywhere we go, too.

Phil and Peggy Moss



*And so we know and rely
on the love God has for us.*

God is love.

*Whoever lives
in love lives in God,
and God in them.*

1 John 4:16

IN GOD'S LOVE

In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent His only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

1 John 4:9-11

Jakarta, Indonesia, is a metropolis of more than 30 million people and one of the largest cities in the world. As Indonesia's capital it boasts the gleaming skyscrapers, wide tree lined boulevards, opulent mansions, and all of the other trappings of any respectable world class city. It is also filled with multitudes of homeless children; overlooked, unwanted, and unloved.

My husband (Sam) and I used to live in Jakarta where I worked with homeless street children. I'll never forget how that began. Late one December night Sam and I went to a nearby park to help a close friend change her flat tire. While Sam was busy with his task around 10 to 15 children, none of them older than 12, crowded around us, entertained at the unusual site of a large white dude changing a tire at midnight.

I started talking to them and found out that they were all homeless. They begged for money from passing cars during the day and slept in the park at night. They were dirty, smelly and covered in open sores. Most were runaways from abusive homes. On a whim I asked them if they would like to get an education. They replied that they would like that, so I offered to teach them if they would come to our place the following morning.

The next day came and, to my disappointment, no one showed up. We went back to the park that night, seeking to find out why no one came. The reason; they had been looked down upon and taken advantage so often that they felt unworthy of being loved or cared for. My heart was broken.

I shared their story with a nearby church and what followed next was truly miraculous. These children saw the love of God in action as church members volunteered to treat their sores, feed them, clean them, teach them, and most of all, love them.

Money was even raised to rent and staff a house where they could live. They were invited to attend the church Christmas service where the children heard the Christmas story for the first time. As a result, those children, who were once unloved by the world, will now abide in God's love forevermore.

Olivia Smallwood

DECEMBER 24

THE CHRISTMAS STORY

About that time Caesar Augustus ordered a census to be taken throughout the Empire. This was the first census when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

Everyone had to travel to his own ancestral hometown to be accounted for. So Joseph went from the Galilean town of Nazareth up to Bethlehem in Judah, David's town, for the census. As a descendant of David, he had to go there. He went with Mary, his fiancée, who was pregnant.

While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. She gave birth to a son, her firstborn. She wrapped him in a blanket and laid him in a manger, because there was no room in the hostel.

There were shepherders camping in the neighborhood. They had set night watches over their sheep. Suddenly, God's angel stood among them and God's glory blazed around them. They were terrified. The angel said, Don't be afraid. I'm here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide: A Savior has just been born in David's town, a Savior who is Messiah and Master. This is what you're looking for: A baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger.

At once the angel was joined by a huge angelic choir singing God's praises:

*Glory to God in the heavenly heights,
Peace to all men and women
on earth who please him.*

As the angel choir withdrew into heaven, the shepherders talked it over. Let's get over to Bethlehem as fast as we can and see for ourselves what God has revealed to us. They left, running, and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. Seeing was believing. They told everyone they met what the angels had said about the child. All who heard these shepherders were impressed.

Mary kept all these things to herself, holding them dear, deep within herself. The shepherders returned and let loose, glorifying and praising God for everything they had heard and seen. It turned out exactly the way they'd been told.

Luke 2:1-20

*The Word became flesh and dwelt
Among Us*

DECEMBER 25

SHARING THE WORD

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning...The Word became flesh and made his dwelling Among Us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 1:1, 14

The Word made His dwelling in me when I was a young girl in this church. Faithful Sunday School teachers, G.A. leaders, a pastor, my sisters and parents all made certain that I heard.

There were so many opportunities to respond to the Word, and I am forever grateful for those opportunities. I wanted to make it possible for others to know Immanuel. Fear was a problem for me, however. How could I think about traveling to another country without the protection I knew here? God brought peace to me through a vivid experience of answered prayer.

A friend asked me to pray for a woman who was going into the hospital to die of an incurable liver disease. She had little children about the same ages of my two children and it seemed so hard to think she would die so young. As I prayed for her, I felt I should pray for her complete healing. It was a step in faith that I had never taken before.

A few weeks later, my friend called and said, *You'll never guess what.* The liver disease had completely disappeared and there was no damage. I was overjoyed and I understood that I didn't need to rely on all the support I had from family and friends. God would take care of me.

Through this and other experiences, Mike and I surrendered to missions and a year later went to Georgia to be appointed. There, we met the very woman I had prayed for. As we shared, we discovered that her healing had inspired them to consider missions also. God had brought us full circle to say, *See, it was all in my plan. You are in my hands. I answer prayer, I heal, I lead, and I protect.*

What joy and peace to know that we were to be allowed to carry the Word to Africa.

Beth Wilson

*The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy
your needs in a sun-scorched land.*

Isaiah 58:11

DECEMBER 26

A SIMPLE WALK

Awhile back I had an experience which I have shared with a few; but now feel led to put it in print.

May you be encouraged by His presence *Among Us* and I invite you into a very private moment of my life.

As part of the Bible study, *Experiencing God*, we were asked to take a 30 minute Praise Walk. For some time I just enjoyed walking in my quiet neighborhood, thanking God for the beauty of His creation. As I was gazing up at the beautiful white clouds, something caused me to freeze in my tracks. I suddenly felt, heard — I am not sure. I just know in that moment God spoke to me and said very clearly in a deep mellow voice, *I love you so-o much.*

I had never felt so totally overwhelmed with such an awesome feeling of complete love. I will never forget how wonderful I felt, so completely wrapped in this incredible love. God was actually telling me how much he loved me!

That experience has become a source of strength, comfort and challenge. How do we respond to this kind of love? *God so loved the world...* John 3:16. *How great is the love the Father has lavished on us.* 1 John 3:1.

Yes! God is *Among Us*, but how much we experience Him and all He has to offer is an individual choice.

Naomi Nakamura

*My sheep hear My voice,
and I know them, and they follow me.*

John 10:27

DECEMBER 27

WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

Everything. As we reflected on the Old Testament in Worship this fall I thought back to one of my favorite verses, Genesis 3:8.

I know Adam and Eve had just disobeyed God, but one day while reading, just the first part of that verse struck me. They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day. God was present for them; He walked in the garden. He loved His creations, man and woman; He wanted to spend time with them. But, they disobeyed and hid from His presence. Yet, He loved them in spite of their sin.

God loves us enough to have sent Christ to earth to save us, to save me. Another of my favorite verses is John 15:12, *This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you.* I think for a lot of us, myself included, we struggle with the last part of the verse; *just as I have loved you.* It is so easy to love people who think like you, speak like you, act like you, believe like you and look like you. But, what about those who don't think, speak, act, believe or look like you? God commands us to love them too, not like we want to love them but as He loves us.

I grew up in a Christian home. I experienced love and acceptance there. Unconditional love, just like God's love of Adam and Eve. They sinned, God loved them anyway. I misbehaved (a lot, but that's a different story), my parents loved me anyway.

I found the political season these past months very difficult personally. It wasn't about the politics, this isn't the time or place for that, it was about how people behaved. My heart hurt at the way folks treated each other for having differing opinions. It literally broke my heart.

My hope for Christmas and beyond is that we, that I, can live daily the commandment God gave me to love one another as He loved us.

Merry Christmas. May God richly bless you in the coming year. May you feel His presence walking beside you daily.

Robin Nipper

ADVENT WORSHIP SERVICES

10:30 a.m.

December 3, December 10, December 17, December 24

YOUTH CHRISTMAS PARTY

6-7:30 p.m.

December 6 in Youth Hall

NORMAN CHRISTMAS PARADE

December 9

Join us at 5 p.m. at Common Ground, 324 W. Main St.

GIVING TREE

Continues until December 10

SOUNDS OF CHRISTMAS CONCERT

The Word Became Flesh

6 p.m., December 10

7 p.m., December 11

GINGERBREAD HOUSE PARTY

6:30 p.m.

December 13 in Hallock Hall

CAROLS AND COCOA

5-7 p.m.

December 20 at the Family Life Center

NO WEDNESDAY ACTIVITIES

December 27

FLC AND CHURCH OFFICE CLOSED

December 25 - December 26

CHRISTMAS EVE CANDLE LIGHTING

6 p.m.