



Behold!

*I bring you GOOD NEWS
of GREAT JOY...*

Luke 2:10

Advent 2018

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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.

BEHOLD!

2018 ADVENT

Are you aware that the word *Behold!* appears in each part of the Christmas story? When the angel appeared to Zacharias to announce that Elizabeth would become pregnant, *Behold!* When the angel appeared separately to Mary and Joseph to announce that Mary would bear a Son, *Behold!* When the angel appeared to the shepherds announcing that a Savior was born, *Behold!* The Christmas story is filled with *Behold!* moments.

Behold! moments are those times in our lives when God gets our attention to announce or reveal His plans and purposes. They are often partnered with *Don't be afraid* moments. *Don't be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. Don't be afraid, Joseph, take Mary as your wife. Don't be afraid (shepherds), I bring you good news of great joy.* The Christmas story is filled with *Don't be afraid* moments.

Behold! moments always require a response. Zacharias and Elizabeth responded with *Hope*, for they had always longed for a child. Mary responded in *Faith*, believing she would conceive. Joseph responded in *Love*, honoring his pledge to take Mary as his wife. The shepherds responded in *Joy*, glorifying and praising God. The Christmas story is filled with moments that require a response of *Hope, Faith, Love and/or Joy*.

When was the last time you had a *Behold!* moment? You may have been afraid, or maybe not. But one thing was for certain, God was as real and present in your life as He had ever been. And you knew that some kind of response was necessary, a response of *Hope, Faith, Love and/or Joy*.

This devotion guide is a gift from First Baptist Norman. The members of our church wrote its pages as they reflected on the *Behold!* moments of the Christmas story and of their own lives. Our prayer is that God will bless you with a *Behold!* moment during this season of Advent. As you prepare for Christmas morning, be sensitive to the presence of God in and around you. Listen. Look. Taste. Touch. Smell. And when that *Behold!* moment arrives, have the courage to respond in *Hope, Faith, Love and/or Joy*.

Dr. Wade E. Smith

BEHOLD!

CELEBRATE HIS GIFTS

Behold! Christmas is the season in which we *Celebrate His Gifts!* The Scripture tells us *God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son.* Jesus, whose birth we celebrate on Christmas morning, is that Gift. *Behold!* declared the angel, *I bring you good news of great joy. . .there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*

The birth of Jesus opens doors for us to experience the gifts of God in new and deeper ways. His life, death and resurrection make possible the gift of salvation to all who believe. As we unwrap the gift of salvation we discover that it is a multi-faceted gift of mercy, forgiveness, healing and new life. The gifts of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control manifest themselves as the fruit of this new life.

Behold! Advent preparation leads to Christmas celebration. As we prepare to receive and *Celebrate His Gifts* on Christmas morning, let us do so by giving gifts of celebration and thanksgiving during this Advent season.

First, we can *Celebrate His Gifts* by supporting the work of missionaries. Missionaries live among people of different cultures to share the Gift of Jesus with the nations (people) of the world. A gift to World Missions through the Lottie Moon and/or Global Missions offerings enables and sustains missionaries as they live among the nations. First Baptist's 2018 World Missions goal is \$65,000. Your gift can be designated, given in worship, brought by the church office, or made online at fbcnorman.org.

Second, our *Christmas Eve Candle Lighting service* is one of the special worship services of the year. Join me as we *Celebrate His Gifts* by bringing a gift for baby Jesus. A package of diapers or baby wipes celebrates the birth of the Christ-child. The gift of formula satisfies the hungry cry of an infant. A warm blanket or coat helps keep a mother and child warm on a cold winter's night. Allow your special gift to be a tangible way that you *Celebrate His Gifts*. These gifts will be distributed through our Community Impact Ministries, meeting the needs of the most vulnerable in our community. Would you *Celebrate His Gifts* by bringing a gift to Baby Jesus and placing it under the tree on Christmas Eve?

Journal Your
Behold!
Moments

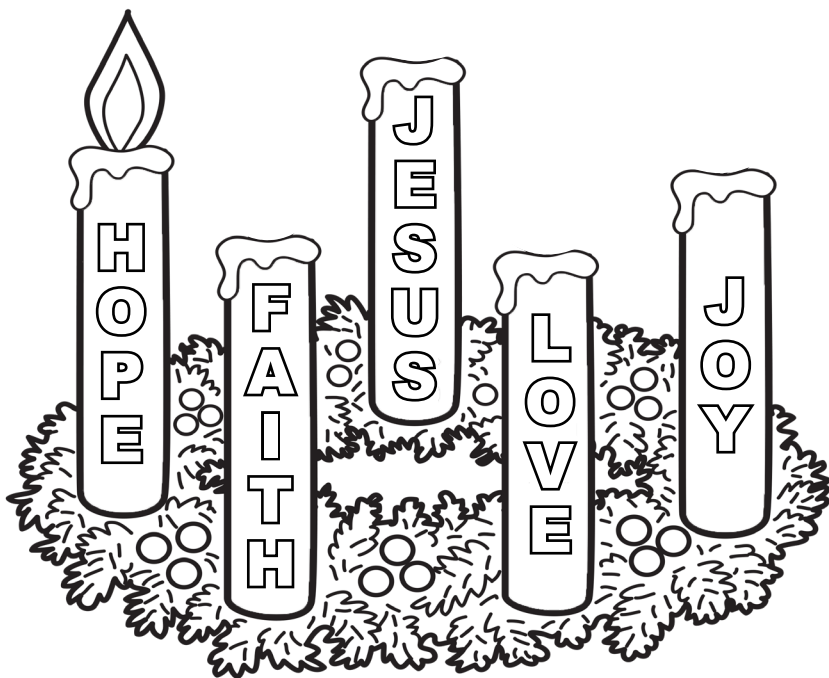


Behold!

HOPE

DECEMBER 1-DECEMBER 8

ALL THE COLORS OF *Christmas*



FAMILY ACTIVITIES

CAR TRIP — Take a drive around town to observe the changes taking place as preparations are made for Christmas... lights, decorations, music, etc. How do all these physical signs help us think about the hope we have in Jesus?

LUMINARIES — Make tin can luminaries to light your front porch or front walkway. Fill empty tin cans with water and freeze. Use a hammer with nails to punch holes in the tin can and create designs. Once the water is melted, place a tea light in the can. It is a fun way to share light as we experience hope during the Advent season.

VISIT A SENIOR CENTER WITH SMALL GIFTS — Many times our older adults in senior centers experience loneliness and can lose their hope. Winter socks tied with ribbon, a sugar free treat, and a hope scripture warms the body and soul.

WHO CAN LIVE WITHOUT HOPE?

Rene had lost almost everything. With the roof blown away, her walls and belongings were left in shambles. She carried her sopping wet belongings to the curb to be taken to the dump. She was one of many people affected by Hurricane Harvey and I met her on my third trip to south Texas. Fourteen months after the hurricane, she still didn't have a livable home. She was losing hope.

Similarly, Zacharias was beginning to lose hope that Elizabeth would have a child. He was a Godly man. A Priest. They suffered disgrace that, possibly God had forgotten them. Perhaps even deemed them not worthy.

Then, while serving in the Temple, Zacharias heard the long awaited news. *Behold*, said the angel Gabriel. Elizabeth will bear a son and he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He will be tasked with preparing the way of the Lord!

Such an answer to prayer and his response is. *How do I know this for certain?*

The result of Zacharias' questioning was silence until the blessed John was born.

Just when you want to shout for joy, when you want to meet the elders on the steps of the Temple and share this good news, you can't.

But God was faithful and, as the baby was born and Zacharias wrote on the tablet, *His name is John*, he could speak. Can you imagine all he wanted to say at that moment? This long awaited child, sent to fulfill scripture. A baby for Elizabeth and the cousin of the Messiah! So much to say!

Rene had lost hope. She and her husband had prayed for a miracle, for him to be cured. They believed it! But two months after the torrential rain ripped the roof off their house, her husband died. She was lost and angry with God. Spending 14 months without gas — heating water to bathe with on a portable propane tank would try anyone's faith.

But as she witnessed a van full of folks from Oklahoma pull up to her house, her eyes brighten a little. As we completed our work we gave her a Bible that the whole team had signed. We connected her to the pastor's wife of a church we work with. That Sunday she attended church, rededicated her life and joined the church!

Behold, what does God want to tell you this holiday season?

Amy Williams

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!
In his great mercy He has given us new birth
into a living hope through the resurrection
of Jesus Christ from the dead.*

1 Peter 1:3

A LOVING HOPE

While God's provision for us, made possible through the birth of His Son, is such an incredible gift, in our lives as followers of Christ we still will encounter challenges, disappointments, and heartaches. In those times, when we are brought low, our need for God's strength is most apparent. But if we take our eyes off of Him, and we focus on our strength alone, we can find ourselves feeling hopeless, and struggling with our faith.

While with the group helping those in need in Refugio, we experienced a *Behold* Hope! moment.

Rene's story was heartbreaking — her husband was critically ill and hospitalized when the hurricane came, and their home was severely damaged. A few weeks after, her husband passed away. Her faith was shaken by the trials of this world and she began to question God's provision for her.

As our group worked to help restore her home — replacing walls and ceilings that were ruined, electrical fixtures, and a gas line — we had the opportunity to begin a relationship with her. We learned about her story and the path on which she had been traveling. She shared that her hope had been shaken. Over the course of the week, we would talk with her about God's love, and that it was greater than any obstacles she might encounter.

I believe Rene beheld hope when she saw brothers and sisters in Christ, from Norman and Refugio, caring for her and helping restore her home (and her hope).

When we offer *the least of these* clothes to wear (say, from the Clothes Closet), or food to eat (at the Sunday Supper), or a place to stay (through our Hands for Harvey missions), we serve our Savior, and give those folks a chance to behold the Hope that comes from our Lord.

Phil Moss

THIS IS HOPE

I cannot remember a time when I thought I was good enough. Early in life I realized that I came up short to other people's expectations. I learned, from some of the most important people in my life, that trying to be better, to do better was pointless because it wouldn't change how I was treated.

Add in some life trauma: illnesses, deaths, financial problems, and I was a mess, plain and simple. I constantly made choices for friendships and activities and romances and jobs that were often destructive and, at the very least, uninspiring. Hopelessness is a familiar state of mind for me.

Thankfully, the Lord put persons in my life who were not hopeless. They were faithful. And they had some things to teach me. First I was taught about God — a pretty big challenge for someone raised on logic and shame.

Second I was taught joy. God taught me love — love of Jesus, love for my family, love for friends and strangers. And the feeling of pure love taught me joy. Third, I was taught how to love during painful experiences and that brought me to Hope.

*And not only that, but we also rejoice in our afflictions,
because we know that affliction produces endurance.*

*Endurance produces proven character, and proven character
produces hope. This hope will not disappoint us,
because God's love has been poured out in our hearts
through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.*

Romans 5:3-5

It's odd how rough times seem to bring out loving behavior. You'd think having multiple blessings or the absence of trauma in life would improve someone's mood and outlook, but ironically, a positive attitude more often stems from distress. This is hope: A desire and expectation for something to happen.

To *Behold* someone with hope, someone who has gone through enormous struggle and pain, is awe-inspiring. The Bible is full of stories about hope: persons who were lonely, ill, barren, desperate — people who cried out— and *Behold!* hope! The Lord changed their minds, their hearts and their circumstances. He is changing me and you.

The birth of our Savior was the biggest hope to come to fruition ever. Christmastime is full of hope for new beginnings, for loving experiences, for shared joy. We spend this time in anticipation and expectation. Believe in the possibilities from Him!

Morgan Linn Rogers

IN WHOM SHOULD I HOPE?

When the angel appeared to Mary in Luke 1:37 and told her she would have a child, she was stunned. How could that be? But the angel said, *Nothing will be impossible with God*. There have been many Christmases in my life that I clung to this verse, as my husband and I sought to fulfill our own dreams of having a family.

Christmas of 1994 was that answer for us. We had just moved into a new house and were having friends over to celebrate the holidays. Our stockings were hung by the chimney. In one stocking was a picture of a dark headed baby boy who had been born in October in Paraguay. The picture represented a new sense of hope for us — a hope for a family.

For the past several years, we had been struggling to have a baby, without success. I had been poked, and prodded through countless infertility treatments and felt like a guinea pig. *Enough* we decided finally. We were getting off this emotional roller coaster. We had lost hope many times that our dream of a family would ever come true. *Where were you, God?* I asked often during those dark times. *We are good people – believers, faithful to each other and to You. Why were we going through this difficult time?*

I did not often have a clear answer. One day, after months of going through the hurdles of the adoption process — a home study, fingerprints, and countless psychological interviews — we received a call that there was a baby available for adoption in Paraguay and did we want to consider him?

Of course we said yes. It seemed as though it was a special gift from God, an unusual answer to heartbreaking prayers whispered up silently, longingly in the night. We finally had hope of a family. That year, we adopted our wonderful son Andre and six years later, we adopted our amazing son Ethan. Our family was complete!

God's answers to our prayers are not always the way we expect. This was true for Mary and it is true for us today. But nothing is impossible for Him.

*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for,
the conviction of things not seen.*

Hebrews 11:1

For me, this type of hope — hope in a loving, caring God — is what has sustained me. Who are you looking to for your hope this Christmas season?

Pat Wilson

FINDING HOPE IN THE MIDST OF HOPELESSNESS

Hopelessness seems to surround us in the world today. Many of us have experienced those hopeless seasons in our journey through life. Reflect on those and try to remember, what was it that triggered the hopelessness and then what about the new found hope? It could have been a loss of a loved one, loss of a job, fear of taking the next step, no matter what that step could have been. I have been there and it is the hope in God that returned me to hope in the midst of hopelessness! In these days of Advent, celebration of family and giving, many times our Hope is overcome by hopelessness, even those of us who find our hope in Christ!

The fifth chapter of Romans speaks of many of the struggles we experience in life, the challenge of living a spirit life in a physical world, of suffering and finding hope. Verses 18-26 especially offer challenges filled with a hope in Christ.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.

Over the last year teams from FBC have taken four trips to the hurricane-ravaged coastal areas of Texas, where we have met individuals who have lost all hope. We have seen damaged homes, loss of family members, no insurance and no one to stand in the gap with them, many who knew their hope was in Christ and yet could not find hope.

God has called this church to go, be the hands and feet of Jesus, take hope in rebuilding of their homes and churches, but also to take Christ's love to them. We have seen hope restored, lives changed both in our teams and the individuals we have gone to assist. We have seen hope in Christ restored because of those willing to go.

How about you in this Advent season? Have you lost all hope? Have you been called to restore hope to someone around you? My prayer is that the two of you meet! In this season of Advent find hope, offer hope, shine the light of the source of hope!

JESUS CHRIST... LORD OF ALL!

Rev. Roy Joe Ham

TAKE HEART

What happens when you feel wiped out and weary? It becomes harder to give. As a family we have been there before. The steps we take feel forced, and the love of Christ we want to share feels miles away during a time that it should be pouring out in all we do.

*I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace.
In this world you will have trouble.
But take heart! I have overcome the world.*

John 16:33

Thinking back on one particular Christmas season when we had to pack up everything we owned and move not just to a new house, or base but to a completely new country. It was taxing to say the least. With a baby in tow and what felt like a million things to accomplish the meaning of the season seemed so far away. With no trappings that would be considered traditional Christmas decor and no family and friends to celebrate with. We had to consider what made the season of giving a blessed season to us.

He gave us peace and He gave us hope. Not that everything would be familiar or that it would even be calm. Christ gave us a gift in the wisdom and knowledge that we had the greatest gift to offer those around us. Him. In between packing and plane rides we met new people and shared in a new experience that season. We saw the spirit of kindness extend from our family and surround all that we met. It wasn't easy and at moments we felt alone. God knew those moments and looking back I see Him work in our footsteps.

We had nothing left to give during that Season but, God filled our cups to overflowing. He provided more than our hearts could hold and it flowed out and into those around us. We will always have trouble and during this Season it can be magnified tenfold.

The Lord gives us hope in the wisdom and knowledge that He has already overcome the world. We pray that this Season no matter how empty your cup may seem that you take solace in the verse above. Take heart our Lord has already given us peace!

God bless and keep you!

Ernie & Jennifer,
Galen & Cowan Chen

NEVER FORSAKEN

The year 2018 has been full of miraculous blessings, but has also been plagued by heartache. Trials enveloped my extended family and friends beginning November of 2017. A series of tragic events spiraled downward during 2018 in tumultuous speed and has not stopped. It has been a devastating year.

Webster defines devastation as thus: *severe and overwhelming shock or grief*. I concur. However, Jesus. Jesus. Born, died, and was resurrected, so now great gain will be had from devastation.

I've witnessed it. My sister, Meredith Austin, was on her deathbed after being crushed by a tree in New Mexico. But, just when the light of her earthly life grew dim, she was saved. Back in Norman, my husband's second father, Larry Wright, was surviving his last few days, but was taken to Heaven to live and claim his heavenly reward.

I'm grateful for a peace that passes all understanding, but my tug-of-war heart has wrestled greatly with understanding the promises of God. Here's to what I hold fast: God will use every trial, every heartache, every devastation to make a mark for His kingdom in this world, while also building a humility and dependency on Him so that we may be as gold when we are called Home.

Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, for what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

2 Corinthians 4:16-1

Although my 2018 troubles do not seem light, they do seem momentary regardless of outcome. What a blessing! What a triumph! What a hope I find in the fact that through my steadfast faith in Jesus, my life, my joy, and my rest lies in Jesus who perfectly orchestrates the tragic as momentary, and the joy as permanent for eternity. I find comfort in that. I find hope in that. I find joy in that. This world is broken, but my faith holds fast to his promise.

I pray with all my might that your faith be renewed this Christmas season, and that you are lead to a path of joyful rejoicing, not forgetting the heartache, but embracing it and knowing God will never forsake you. Never.

Whitneyrose C. Upchurch

UNEXPECTED WAYS

Moments of joy are often embedded in a whirlwind of emotions. When the path ahead seems to be one of emptiness and despair, there is suddenly a glimpse of light and peace. When our lives change in the most unexpected way, and joy seems as elusive as quicksilver, God in his infinite wisdom guides us on a new path. On that path, we must be open to unique possibilities and life-changing experiences woven together with faith.

For me, Christmas has always been a time of spiritual renewal enhanced by familiar traditions. When my husband died during the Christmas season, I am the first to admit that I wasn't interested in a new path. I desperately wanted the security of the old life that I knew so well. God recognized my despair, gave me a comforting hug, and gently nudged me toward a new path, a path that would enrich my life in unexpected ways.

Through God's grace, I have had amazing experiences related to helping others during the Christmas season. Working as a volunteer at the Norman Christmas Day Community Dinner, I found myself in the midst of traditional food, gifts, laughter and fellowship with hundreds of people who, for a few hours, felt like family.

Bridges is a program that serves high school students in family crisis, and working with these incredible teenagers has been part of God's plan for me. Christmas at Bridges is life-changing for both the residents and volunteers who work for several months to give these teenage survivors a Christmas to happily remember.

Until my mother's death last year, she lived in an assisted living facility. My mom and I spent many Christmas afternoons visiting with residents who were alone on a day associated with friends and family. I loved hearing their stories of past Christmases still very vivid in their memories. God encouraged me to take the time not only to be with my mother but also to include those who needed someone to listen.

In the process of losing an old life and beginning a new one, I continue to count my blessings. My faith and spirituality have grown in amazing ways because of my involvement in this church and the support that it gives me in every phase of my life.

I have also been a part of the giving side of this community that I call home. God continues to lead me down new paths and helps me to find the joy in everyday as he fulfills this promise:

For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord. They are plans for good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

Jeremiah 29:11

Nancy Roley

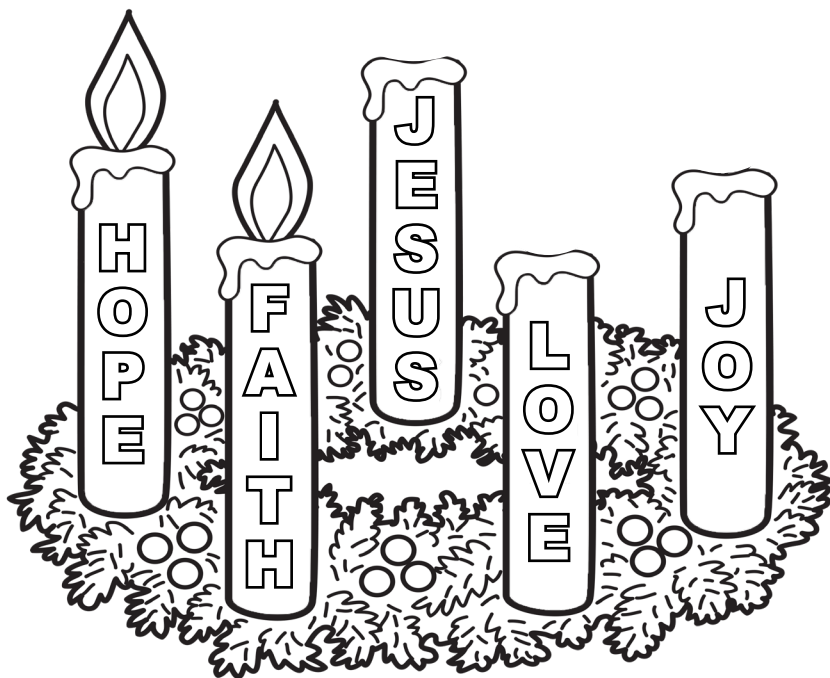


Behold!

FAITH

DECEMBER 9-DECEMBER 15

ALL THE COLORS OF *Christmas*



FAMILY ACTIVITIES

ORNAMENT — Make or shop for a family ornament to put on your tree this year that is an expression of faith for your family

BIRD FEEDER — Make a pine cone bird feeder (peanut butter/bird seed) as an expression of faith in God as he cares for the birds and cares for your family.

FAITH SCAVENGER HUNT — Encourage each family member to locate two things in your home that remind them of the many ways that God is faithful. Share your objects and thoughts at one of your family meals.

When I am afraid I will put my trust in you.

Psalms 56:3

THE CHURCH PIANIST

Growing up in the small eastern Oklahoma town of Spiro, I attended the First Baptist Church. I made my profession of faith and was baptized at the age of 10.

Home, school, and church formed the fabric of community for those of us who were fortunate to grow up in the 40s and 50s. Many of my teachers were members of First Baptist and that added to my feelings of security and safety in my small world. The adults became our mentors and were people we knew we could trust. Along with our parents, they helped us build our faith and have hope for the future.

My junior high school English teacher was the church pianist/organist. Since her son was a fine pianist she assigned him to play for church services and gatherings during his high school years. He played the piano and she played the organ. When he graduated and went away to college she decided that I would take his place. I had been taking piano lessons for years, loved church music and liked the idea of doing this.

If there was a funeral at the church on a weekday, I was expected to play for that as well. With the permission of the principal (also a First Baptist member) I walked to the church, played for the funeral and walked back to school when the service was over. I can't imagine our students being allowed to leave school regularly to play for a funeral at church in this day and time, but that was life in a small town.

I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to have been a church pianist. This activity allowed me to learn the lyrics and music to many additional hymns. I often catch myself singing these hymns aloud or in my head. They have uplifted me during times of stress and worry as well as times of joy and happiness. God seems to provide just the right hymn whenever I need it. For me, these are encounter and *Behold* moments and make me aware that God is faithful and always with me.

Behold faith! I hope you will learn to look for encounters with Immanuel when you least expect it. Look for *Behold* moments in everyday life. Psalm 56:3 is one of my life verses because it reminds me of God's faithfulness to be with me. I pray you will look for *Behold Immanuel* moments not only at Christmas but in your daily life.. *I am the Lord's servant, Mary answered. May it be to me as you have said...* (Luke 1:38).

I pray we can all become more like Mary by being the Lord's faithful servants in everything we do.

Sarah Redwine

Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

Luke 2:10-14

BEHOLD MOMENTS

Behold (Latin - *Ecce*; Greek - *βλέπω*; Hebrew - *הנה*.) The word can be defined as something you see or experience, especially of a remarkable or impressive nature.

All through life we *Behold* remarkable and impressive moments, mountains, oceans, music and other examples of things or events that we perceive as extraordinary. In the context of this writing, we'll think about the word in a joyful sense.

When you reach the age of 16, pass the driver's test and received a license that you can actually hold in your hand – *Behold* – you have a certificate that gives you permission to drive a car without another licensed driver in the front seat! Joy! How much better can it get?

If you are married, think about your wedding day. After the final *I Do*, *Behold*, Mr. and Mrs. How can life get much better? And again, joy!

When you hear the first cry of your newborn child or see them for the first time during the adoption process you feel that life is at its peak. *Behold*, the newest member of our family. And again, joy!

At some point in your life someone told you about Christ. How He loves, how He forgives, how He saves and how you can become one of His. *Behold*, the One who passes all understanding can be your friend, confidant, savior. And again, joy!

When you think about your personal *Behold* moments in life, think about Mary when she realized the significance of the One to whom she had given birth. Not in a palace or a five-star hospital, not with the world's finest medical professionals in attendance, but in a cold manger in the presence of Joseph, a few barn animals and God.

Jim Spearman

It also seemed good to me, since I have carefully investigated everything from the very first, to write to you in an orderly sequence, most honorable Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things about which you have been instructed.

Luke 1:3

GOD WITH ME

Coming to OU in the fall of 1963, I was probably a typical freshman, trying to figure out why I was here, and gawking (both figuratively and literally) at everything and everyone new around me. I found the place almost overwhelming, and everything seemed uncertain. What was I supposed to be doing? What was important? How to know what I need? What did I need?

One of the first things I needed was a friend and I quickly found one in the Baptist Student Union, one Jim Lassiter. We clicked immediately and began hanging out together. Another thing I needed was a church, and while I had a vague notion of finding one, I really had no idea how to go about it. It was Jim who suggested I go to First Baptist because, *all the university students go there*. So, I did too.

At FBC, I encountered three people who profoundly affected me: two Bible study teachers, Dan Hobbs, the vice-chancellor of higher education for Oklahoma at the time, and Dale Jordan, a PhD student, but more importantly, Preacher Hallock, the pastor.

As I listened to them Sunday after Sunday, something began to rise in my thinking: they knew God and his Word in a deep, pervasive way that I didn't. They actually built their daily lives around God and the reliability of the Bible. These men were fully convinced that God was acting in the world and that the Bible was dependable for guiding them as they made decisions, interacted with people, and went about daily living.

I had always tried to act like a Christian but these men actually lived Christian lives. And, through them, across the months, God became increasingly Immanuel, God with me. He wasn't *up there* anymore, but in me, stirring me up.

I learned that I could truly know God at a personal level I had never experienced. I could depend on Him to teach me, guide me, correct me and assure me of His love for me. I could know the Bible was true and depend on it to teach me. My faith became sight and I knew with certainty that God was among us and working in me.

Michael S. Wilson PhD

*Unto you is born this day in the City of David
a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*

Luke 2:11

NEVER ALONE

I have known the story of Jesus' birth since I was small, even before my dad died when I was 4. That fall my mother, sister, brother, and I moved to a new town. On Christmas Eve, my mother, ever the school teacher, opened her Bible and stood, reading the Christmas story from Luke. I knew the story, but this was a formality I have remembered.

I met Glen at First Baptist in 1989. We married in May 1990. Life was more or less normal for most of the 26½ years we were married.

In September 2016, Glen had been on dialysis four months; he was 95. He could not sit for three hours. He was ready to quit dialysis, an automatic death sentence, and we both knew it.

His last day of dialysis was the last Monday of September. One day while he was still able to walk through the house, he said, *I've asked the Lord twice to take me, but he hasn't seen fit to do it yet.* When someone asked me how long he would live, I said, *Not until after the obituary and order of service are written.*

The first weekend after dialysis he told me he wanted me to go to church. That Sunday morning I walked into the choir room, and as I waited to pick up my music, I felt a peace, and it was like a sheer curtain had fallen all over me.

As I sat down in my chair, I said to myself, *I needed this.* The music that morning, and the next two Sundays, was what I needed to hear and sing.

Glen died the 17th day after his last dialysis treatment. The next Sunday, as we sang *Never Alone*, I knew I truly had not been alone.

After he died, as I was folding a blanket, I thought, *Hmm, I'm not as tired as I thought I would be.* The Lord was with me those days, and I wouldn't take anything for them.

*You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit
not many days from now.*

Acts 1:5

Sarah Myers Pool

DECEMBER 12

*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

ALL THINGS...

Earlier this year, I journeyed to Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. I had read about the country's magnificent scenery and could not wait to behold the sights. I was not disappointed as each bend in the road brought yet another stunning view.

Toward the end of my travels, I inadvertently left a bag on a bus. The bag contained my passport, credit cards, cell phone, camera and all my cash. After a few panicky moments, I did what Christians are taught to do: Pray. While praying, the Lord reminded me of a nearby tourist information station. I told the kindly clerk about my mishap. He called the bus office, which contacted the bus driver.

At that point, all I could do was wait for confirmation that the driver had located my bag. A blind gentleman sitting nearby struck up a conversation with me, as the Irish are prone to do.

The man, Pearse, asked me if I was having problems. I told him about my predicament. Pearse informed me that everything was going to be OK, then handed me 20 euros. I told Pearse I did not know how to thank him. Pearse responded that I could *say a prayer or two* for him. I told Pearse I would be praying for him until the end of my days.

With the euros, I purchased a bus ticket to the central city bus office, where the lost and found department was located. The lengthy ride was hampered by the fact the bus broke down. It was difficult not to dwell on all the worst-case scenarios. However, I remembered God's promise ... *all things work together for good...*

I knew He had placed Pearse in my path for a reason. I finally arrived at the city office where the staff produced my bag. I checked the contents. Nothing was missing!

While the scenery in Ireland was breathtaking, I have to say that my lost bag was a site to *Behold* on that particular day.

I give praise to our all-powerful God, who continues to provide constant reminders, beginning with the promise of His Son, that He will faithfully lead us on the path to Salvation.

Kim Marks

*I came to bring truth to the world. All who love the truth
recognize that what I say is true.*

John 18:28-38

I THANK GOD

*I*went on my first Mission Trip to Togasa, Indonesia, in 1999. Togasa was a small village on an island, there were about 80 huts there. Upon arrival I was told some of the people did not want to hear anything about Jesus, but they had agreed to tolerate our group if we left them alone.

I admit my reason for going on this trip was mostly to see what this part of the world was like. I know God wanted me to witness for Jesus but I wasn't excited about the opportunity before me. As the days pass I became excited to see the Holy Spirit take control, many prayed to receive Jesus as their Savior that week.

Every day, when we would leave the church to witness to people, there was an old man outside a hut across the street. He would stare at me. I asked if we could visit him and tell him about Jesus. The pastor would say *no, he is a nonbeliever and does not want you to come to him.*

On the last day we were witnessing, the old man stared at me again, I asked the pastor the same question and received the same reply. I told the pastor I was going to him anyway! The old man started walking fast toward me. I began to think I should have listened to the pastor.

As the old man came very close to me he said, with tears in his eyes, *I thank God for bringing someone from so far away to tell me the truth about Jesus!* I led this man in a prayer to accept Jesus as Savior.

This day I learned the truth about Jesus is powerful and that we should declare *Behold* Jesus to everyone. I also learned God has chosen ordinary people like me to tell others about Jesus, and I should take this assignment very seriously.

God will show us how to tell others about him.

Mark 1:17

Larry Gardner

*And the angel said to them, Do not be afraid;
for behold, I bring you good news of great joy!*

Luke 2:10

A HILLSIDE IN BETHLEHEM

As I consider the Christmas story and how it may have unfolded had I been able to witness firsthand, the event that would change the world.

I would have taken in the sights and smells of the stable. I would have watched the animals as they welcomed strangers into their space. I would have taken in the emotion of Mary and Joseph as they looked into the eyes of a new baby. And, perhaps in that moment, I would have most wanted to talk to the shepherds to hear in detail about their journey to Bethlehem, the messages from angels, the path they walked, and the sheep over which they kept watch.

A couple of years ago, I was able to stand on a hillside in Bethlehem. In my mind's eye, I saw the sky filled with angels and I heard the proclamations of good news.

I visualized the sheep in the valley and the bystanders who probably had no idea they were witnessing life changing events.

Our group was guided to a place where we were encouraged to sing *O Come Let Us Adore Him*. The moment was moving and meaningful to all who were present.

During that trip, as we walked the ground where Mary and Joseph no doubt walked, and the very spot believed to be the birth place of the Christ child, the Christmas story came to life in a new way.

Since then, I think about that place which was just a stable to some and a sacred place to others. I'm reminded of the beauty of the story, the love of the Father and the way in which He brought the world a Savior.

*And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of
the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the
highest, And on earth peace among all people.*

Luke 2:13-14

Chris Kennedy



Behold!

LOVE

DECEMBER 16-DECEMBER 22

ALL THE COLORS OF *Christmas*



FAMILY ACTIVITIES

HOST A CHRISTMAS BOOK PARTY — Each child is invited to bring an unwrapped Christmas book for a child in need. Enjoy time with the children reading the Christmas story, decorating cookies, playing games, and wrapping the books. Talk about how important it is to share Jesus with others, even with books. Following the party take all the books to a shelter or a children's home.

HOMEMADE CHRISTMAS CARDS — Make homemade Christmas cards that express God's great love for all people. Attach the cards to special gifts and expressions of love.

RANDOM ACTS OF KINDNESS — Give each child in your family \$5 and make a trip to a discount store. Look for individuals that do their primary shopping there. Perhaps there is a single parent buying diapers or an older adult buying food. Pick someone out and get behind them in the checkout. When it's time for them to pay, contribute \$5 in a homemade Christmas card toward their purchases.

*So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying:
‘Behold, the virgin shall be with child,
and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,’
which is translated, ‘God with us.’*

BEHOLD THE LOVE

And so was Jesus begotten to us here on earth, through a girl in her early teens. How like God to come down Himself to save us. To do so in rude, dirty surroundings, amidst the little people of the world. To come to us in the most unexpected manner in order to accomplish unimaginable good for us.

A recent birth was unexpected for the Dwyer clan, too. As I drove to Norman from Oklahoma City four years ago, my wife Grace called and asked me to come to her Century 21 office without going home. She said nothing more. In 30 years of marriage, I've been in enough hot water with my wife to be more than a little nervous as to what was afoot that day.

When I arrived, she handed me a two page letter our daughter Katie — single, not engaged, not dating anyone steadily — had given her. It revealed she was pregnant. I realized the next words out of my mouth would likely have an impact on Dwyer family history. Thankfully, God gave me: *Well, sweetie, you've been wanting a grandchild!*

My next stop, unannounced, was to Katie at her office. God gave her hugs and love through me, and when Luke Jackson Dwyer arrived at 3:29 a.m. on July 6, 2015, at the Norman HealthPlex, he was one of the most anticipated, welcomed, and loved babies I ever heard of.

Our Facebook friends have watched him grow for more than three years. He climbed a fence and rode a pony at 1 year of age, drove his own little motorized car at 2, and raced 100 yards on foot down my old Duncan High football field on a 100-degree August day just after turning 3. He is kind to animals, shares with people, and loves to play with Paw Paw.

Grace, Katie, and I marvel how we all love that funny little boy more than anything we ever have.

The 19th century English theologian J.C. Ryle well addressed both of these remarkable births: *These are very mysterious subjects. They are depths, which we have no line to fathom. They are truths, which we have not mind enough to comprehend. Let us not attempt to explain things which are above our feeble reason. Let us be content to believe with reverence, and let us not speculate about matters which we cannot understand. Enough for us to know that with Him who made the world nothing is impossible.*

John Dwyer

DECEMBER 16

...behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you...'

Matthew 21:13

MOVING AGAIN

When we moved to Norman, I was a seventh-grader and had already moved eight times.

In January 1969, Mary and I were married at First Baptist Church Norman. That summer after I graduated from OU, the Air Force sent us to California where we moved three times. Californian Christmases had not been cold or snowy but that was going to change. After 13 years, they sent us to Washington, D.C., for six months.

In December 1982 they sent us to Ohio. First a whiteout snow hit Washington, D.C. When we arrived in Dayton, it was below freezing.

Without a home, we stayed in the Air Force motel, including Christmas Day. Our two kids were sixth- and seventh-graders and had never experienced cold. Both kids soon developed bronchitis and I got laryngitis—*voiceless* (some say that was a blessing).

With our furniture in storage, we had no Christmas decorations or music. We bought a wonderful Christian Christmas tape by Evie. We played it over and over. These wonderful Christmas sounds warmed our hearts in that cold wonderland.

Christmas shopping was a wonder, too. People actually talked to you and were happy to help you — unbelievable and what a joy! There were no long lines — another wonder. It was wonderful to be out of very large cities.

Our Christmas tree was a live one-foot potted evergreen with a few small decorations. The room was looking a lot like Christmas.

The only gift I remember was a sled we bought the kids. It is the memories of being together that were important, not the physical gifts. In fact, most Christmas gifts I cannot remember, but I do remember the warm family and worship times when we remember our Savior's birth. The Christmas Eve worship services at FBC are still expanding this joy.

Joy to the world — let heaven and earth proclaim His love! The warm feeling of being close to the family on this day when we celebrate the birth of our Savior — Jesus my Lord — is a real joy.

That year I learned much about the true meaning of Christmas. It was not important where you are or what you have. Even in sickness, God's gift is the most wonderful thing ever! I do remember his gift — Jesus. Thank God for loving us so much.

Larry Varner Sr

DECEMBER 17

*Fear not for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your
God; I will strengthen you, I will help you,
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.*

Isaiah 41:10

I WILL UPHOLD YOU

After many years of trying and not being successful in carrying a baby, our daughter and son-in-law decided to adopt. They simply spread the word to friends, family and employees where they worked. God was with them through this time.

In a few months, a young lady told our daughter that she knew of someone who was pregnant, and that the lady didn't have a plan for a home for the child. She had given up another child to adoption prior to this and she planned on doing the same with this one.

Within a week, our daughter met with this woman. It was a very special meeting. In a short time, our daughter felt that this is what God wanted for her family. God gave them strength and helped them to make this life changing decision.

The birth mother asked our daughter to go with her to her next doctor's appointment. Five short days after meeting each other, together they found out that she was pregnant with a baby girl.

Although, this was the woman's sixth pregnancy, she said no one had ever gone with her to any doctors appointments. She was so blessed and touched to have someone with her, and we were equally blessed to know that this woman would give our daughter her baby. God upheld both families.

The birth mom kept in touch, and in January 2014, she went into labor. Our daughter and son-in-law were with her through it all. She gave birth to a beautiful baby girl. *Behold* joy! Now this baby is almost 5, and each time Phil and I are with her, we count it all joy. She is full of love and light.

Throughout the process, we experienced God with us — bringing us together, watching over mother and child and the joy in holding the newborn baby!

Peggy Moss

*Always be full of joy in the Lord; I say it again, rejoice!
Let everyone see that you, are unselfish and considerate in
all you do. Remember that the Lord is coming soon.*
Philippians 4:4

THE BIBLE TELLS US SO

Growing up, I felt my birthday was the best day in the year. I could have my favorite breakfast and my favorite dinner, a lot of chocolate. I was Queen for a Day, treated like I was the most special person in the world with gifts from all the family. Having reached my Golden Years, I now have the same feeling for Jesus on His birthday, a feeling we should have every day of the year.

Stores, shops, television, and newspapers are filled with suggestions for gifts for family and friends, but what are we giving to Jesus? It is His birthday!

A night tucked into my heart some 80 years ago, I can recall clearly. I was an angel in my church's Christmas pageant, First Baptist Church, Sherman, Texas. My Mother made me a long white satin robe and somehow attached the most beautiful white feathered wings. It was so easy to pretend I was an angel. I was on stage the entire program and I had a lot of time to think about what we were trying to act out. I was overcome with the feeling. *This is Jesus' birthday*, not anyone else's. What are we giving Jesus to let Him know we love Him?

On the way home after the pageant, I asked my parents, *What are we doing for Jesus' birthday?* They helped me understand when we do for others we are truly giving gifts for Jesus. They helped me understand we are the eyes, ears, feet, and hands of Jesus. When we see a need or even hear of a need, we must do all we possibly can to assist whether it be a child, an adult or the church. And, it is every members opportunity to give to Jesus all year long, especially, at Christmas, His birthday. That simple explanation remains in my heart to this day. My parents were great examples.

There are so many ways we can gift Jesus, not only on His birthday but all through the year. We celebrate His birthday by giving food and clothing to the needy, diapers for the babies, volunteer with the children at church and schools, work with internationals class, assist those who need transportation, volunteer in the kitchen — the list is long. There are so many ways all year long to celebrate Jesus' birthday for all ages.

We should not forget our gifts must include patience, kindness, thoughtfulness, and love. I feel certain Jesus accepts any and all gifts throughout the year because He loves each of us, for the Bible tells us so.

Dot Adkins

*Behold, a virgin shall be with child,
and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name
Immanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.*

Matthew 1:23

GOD IS WITH US

Christmas finds me in a different place this year. Don't get me wrong, I love everything there is about Christmas!

The decorations, driving around to look at Christmas lights, caroling, going to festive get-togethers, ugly Christmas sweaters, drinking hot chocolate while watching the Christmas parade — you name it, I love it! It takes all that is within me to wait until the day after Thanksgiving to put up my tree and play Christmas music. I really do believe it is the most wonderful time of the year!

As we approach this holiday season, I know that Christmas is going to look different for me and my family. My aunt passed away suddenly in August from an aneurysm at the age of 61. The closer Christmas gets, the more I'm filled with mixed emotions.

The peace that calms my heavy heart is this; *God is with me*. While I know this will be a difficult Christmas for my family, it truly is a reminder of what the Christmas story is all about.

God came down to be with us. No matter what struggles we go through on this earth, *He is with us*. That doesn't mean we are exempt from pain. Yes, I will shed tears and miss my aunt dearly. Losing her hurts everyday but He gives me peace and comfort. With Him, you never go through pain alone.

He also gives me joy in knowing I will see her again. He gives me great joy when I think of the wonderful Christmas celebration she will witness in heaven this year.

I don't know where Christmas finds you this year. If you are experiencing grief, loss, pain, disappointment; my prayer is that His love will surround you. I hope you feel His presence. Please know He is here and He offers us joy and hope through our pain. *God is with us*.

Staci Rhea

*Look (Behold) I have been standing at the door
and I am constantly knocking. If anyone hears me calling
Him and opens the door, I will come in and have fellowships
with Him and He with Me.*

Rev. 3:20

GLAD TIDINGS OF GREAT JOY

This verse is often seen as an invitation to those outside of Christ, and it can be. However, this is part of a letter written to a lukewarm church.

Rereading this chapter resulted in some self-examination. Just who, and what, is a lukewarm Christian? Verse 19 sheds some light:

I continually discipline and punish everyone I love, so I must punish you, unless you turn from your indifference and become enthusiastic about the things of God.

This quote was at the top of that page in my Bible:

God loves us as we are; but He loves us too much to leave us as we are
(author unknown).

Some of you may remember when *Open Windows* always had these wise words on the inside cover:

Each morning lean thy arms awhile on the windowsill of heaven and gaze upon thy God. Then with this view etched in your memory, turn strong to meet your day.

This Christmas season, may the Glad Tidings of great joy the angels proclaimed, fill our hearts anew, and may we catch the enthusiasm of the shepherds who couldn't wait to share the good news.

Anytime we hear Him calling and open the door to Him, we can claim Psalms 16:11: *You have let me experience the joys of life and the exquisite pleasures of your eternal presence.*

Wishing all a joyous Christmas!

Naomi Nakamura

THE SHEPHERDS' FIELDS, BETHLEHEM, ISRAEL

It was the morning of the eighth day as we boarded the bus and headed for Bethlehem. We drove through the fence that separates the Jews and the Palestinians and through the tight streets of this ancient city. After touring the Church of the Nativity, we bussed over to a place called Shepherds' Fields.

As we walked along the path from the street to the sitting area, it was as if we were walking back in time. Brother Wade reminded us that this was the valley that Ruth and Naomi walked through, that David was anointed as the future king and that the shepherds first heard of Christ's birth. So many important aspects of God's plan through the centuries happened right here. As we sat there in the quiet, with the wind gently blowing, my mind wandered to a quiet night so many years before.

The shepherds were doing their job this night, like many nights before, and seemingly endless nights to come, when...

And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest,

And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.'

Luke 2:9-14

What joy! One of the lowest levels of society, the shepherds working the overnight shift, received the first announcement of the Savior of the world. Can you imagine the amazement, the awe and the exhilaration the shepherds felt as they looked for the Savior that night?

As we boarded the bus, we all knew we would never feel the same about the passage above. *Behold* joy has come to us all, for all time. Let us bring that joy to a world that still needs to hear that *good news of great joy*.

Chuck Lawrence

DECEMBER 22

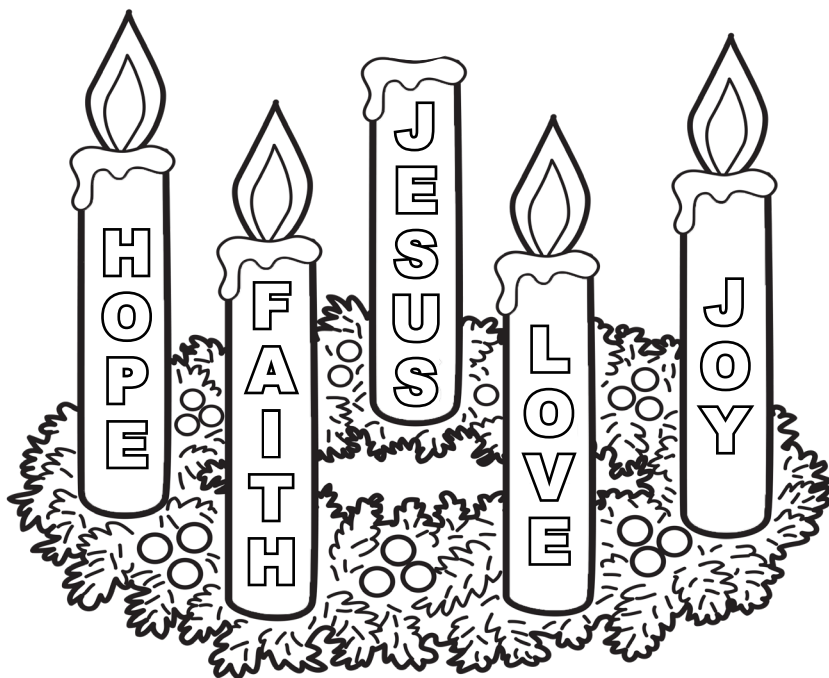


Behold!

JOY

DECEMBER 23

ALL THE COLORS OF *Christmas*



FAMILY ACTIVITIES

FUN CHRISTMAS VIDEOS — Prepare some yummy hot chocolate. Watch funny Christmas videos of children telling the Christmas story on YouTube, drink hot chocolate, smile, and giggle together.

A FUN MEAL — Enjoy a family pasta meal with colored or holiday shaped pasta. Share the story of Christmas together through the reading of scripture and/or reading a new children's book.

ACT IT OUT — Encourage your children to find items around the house to dress up and create their own reenactment of the Christmas story. Remember to take photos or a video of this treasured moment.

For to us a Child is born, to us a Son is given
Isaiah 9:6

GOD USES US

The birth of a child changes your lives forever. The birth can bring joy, fear, excitement, anxiety and, challenges.

When John and I began our family after seven years of marriage we were so excited and ready. At least we thought we were.

The pregnancy was going so smoothly and the baby was growing and developing perfectly. We could not have been happier.

Unexpectedly, at seven months, our son was born. So the joy was turned into concern and anxiety about his survival. With lots of prayers from our families and our church family, he began to heal and grow healthy.

Finally, after a month in the NICU, we brought our son home where he continued to grow and develop into a healthy baby. It was a very scary time for John and me, but with the support we received through prayer and hugs of encouragement we made it through. God has a plan and He uses each of us to complete His plan.

I think about Mary and Joseph and all they had to overcome to bring God's Son into this world. The whisperings of those in their village, the anxiety of Mary telling Joseph and her family, Joseph believing the message he received. The faith each of them had to have in trusting what the angel was telling them.

Then Mary and Joseph had the long journey to Bethlehem, finding lodging and two young people all alone when the birth came. God sent help in the form of angels, shepherds, and Wise Men to give Mary and Joseph provisions, prayers, and encouragement.

On that first Christmas morning when they experienced the birth of God's Son, our Savior, not only did their lives change but the lives of all mankind were changed forever. The joy of knowing who He would be and His mission on this earth was an overwhelming responsibility for this young couple, but they believed and obeyed.

Just as God used Mary and Joseph to accomplish the greatest task in His eternal plan for salvation, God uses us. Not just during this special time of year, but every day we need to have the faith and trust in God's plan that we can be the tools He uses to accomplish His tasks.

Just like Mary and Joseph, we need to be confident of God's ultimate control over the events in our lives and find joy in all the ways God blesses us and allows us to bring joy to others.

Karen Reddell

DECEMBER 23



Behold!

CHRIST

DECEMBER 24-DECEMBER 29

ALL THE COLORS OF *Christmas*



FAMILY ACTIVITIES

VISIT A LIVE NATIVITY — Look for a live Nativity to visit as a family. Take time to talk about the different scenes as you experience it. Enjoy a Christmas treat together while you read Luke 1:21-35 together.

NEIGHBORHOOD TREAT — Make a special treat or snack for all the neighbors on your street, the people you know and the ones you do not know. Take time to create festive wrap or cards. Go as a family to each neighbor and share His love with those that live around you.

DIAPERS AND WIPES — Participate in the Christmas Eve service at First Baptist Norman by bringing the gift of diapers and wipes to be given to young parents that need support.

*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 that will cause great joy for all the people.
Today in the town of David a Savior
has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.
Luke 2:8-11*

CHRISTMAS EVE MEMORIES

These verses remind us of sweet memories on Christmas Eve. On this night, we had a tradition of staying up late and attending the candlelight service at First Baptist Church Common Ground.

The dimly lit room would fill with candles of His light; this small and intimate service refocused our minds on the most important gift of the season — the unconditional love God gave us through His gift, Jesus.

After the service, we would quietly walk to our car in the crisp winter air, and, when looking up at the stars sparkling in the clear sky, we were always reminded of the amazement the shepherds must have felt when a chorus of angels announced Jesus' birth to them.

Our awe of God's unconditional love is made deeper by the knowledge that He was giving hope to all of us. At the time of Jesus' birth, shepherds were considered the farthest from God since they were seen as unclean which meant they were excluded from worshipping at the temple. Although they provided the animals for the temple sacrifices, they could not worship in it.

God chose these lowly shepherds to be the first to know of His Son's birth. While society may have thought the shepherds were not worthy, God loves all of his children.

We cannot help but reflect that God, in his infinite wisdom, selects all people alike to experience His joy, specifically the joy of the birth of His Son. His joy and love are everlasting and intended for all from the shepherds in the fields to our family on Christmas Eve.

Lisa and Paige Portwood

THE JOY OF SALVATION

Our first Christmas as missionaries in Togo was very different. We had lived in Colorado and were used to crisp, snowy days. Christmas carols, hot chocolate, and a fireplace brought contentment and comfort.

Togo is very hot and humid. We didn't see decorations, hear carols, or enjoy cold weather. We had begun a Bible study, but the people had no idea how to celebrate the birth of Christ. The people of Togo were very poor and could not afford to celebrate as we do in America.

How could we communicate the joy that the angels brought the shepherds as they sang (Luke 2:10), or the wise men felt as they saw the star? (Matthew 2:10)

We decided to have a Christmas party. We sang and played games (musical chairs in which I feared that my dining chairs would not survive) and retold the Christmas story. Around 10:30 p.m., we suggested that the party should end. One young man, Kwaku, couldn't stop.

Kwaku was a mechanic from a remote village. He had come to our town seeking work, but found Jesus instead. He couldn't stop rejoicing. After everyone left, he stood outside our house and serenaded us all night. His joy knew no limit.

Later, he came to our house rejoicing again. His brother had come to visit, and Kwaku had nothing for a meal. He prayed and asked God to show him how to find food. He went fishing and caught a very large fish.

Next, he grew concerned about people in his village who had never heard of Jesus. He wanted to go back and bring the gospel to his people, but he needed to support himself there. He wanted our prayers, then some old clothes that he could sell to support himself. He went back, and we didn't hear from him for a while.

The next time he came, he was filled with joy because many people had accepted Christ and he had begun a church. He shared his stories of God's provision and of how the people who had never heard were rejoicing at finding the one true God. And we rejoiced with him! This joy was possible without a single decoration, Christmas cookie, or Christmas tree.

We brought Kwaku the joy of his salvation, but he continued to bring us joy as he faithfully and joyfully served God.

Beth Wilson

BEHOLDEN TO CHRISTMAS

Each Christmas we find ourselves beholden to this special holiday and the generics that surrounds us. As church members we are especially beholden to great memories of Christmas, words of the past and the fever of the present. There is much that garners our attention, especially music and love.

We especially look forward to the great music that surrounds us. Music that has been an important part of our past. Precious memories fill our hearts with special texts and uplifting music that has brought us right up to 2018. Surprisingly, it is eternally in our hearts and minds and gives us great joy.

One of the important ways we celebrate Christmas is with the gifts that we share. The greatest gift of all time was the Christ that dominates our lives, times, and hopes that are relevant to each one of us. It is no wonder that we celebrate His birthday.

We anticipate, mercy, promise, hope, and happily listen to the great stories of the past from every source. We enjoy endearing sermons from the pulpit, special stories from television, as well as, published accounts of current events that, for the most part, relate to the greatest story of all time, the birth of our Lord.

Christmas is the appropriate time to attend the Christmas Eve service in our beautiful sanctuary, that we all call home. Historically we are reminded that everything exciting happens here at our church. We are born here, we eat here, we are wed here, we worship here, we sing here, and we die here. All of the important things happen here. Even today, it is the only legacy that most of us share.

Mark Twain said that *Every family is a nation, with its patriarchs, rules, calls, expectations, and responsibilities*. It's the thing that makes our family great, provides encouragement, and the most wonderful appreciation we ever get from any source.

The church serves as, perhaps, the best opportunity to enjoy and see it all happen. It is magic. At this moment, we are sharing our devotional guide, ideas, and experiences with each other. Is your family near and dear just now?

We wish you all a Merry Christmas, and all that goes with it.

Jim and Dorothy Harp

*The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said,
'Behold, the Lamb of God,
Who takes away the sin of the world.'*

John 1:29

BEHOLD, THE LAMB OF GOD!

Ever heard John 3:16? Of course you have. It's everywhere. Watch a sporting event on TV and there is someone holding up a sign that reminds you of it. You can quote it in your sleep. It just may be the most familiar verse in the Word of God.

But I have a question for you. When was the last time you ever stopped to think about what it says? Even when reading it we tend to gloss over it because it is so familiar to us.

There's another verse that is very familiar to us that often receives the same casual glance. It, too, is from John's gospel. *Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.*

We know what it means. But do we really understand the depth of it? Simeon did (Luke 2:25-32) as he looked on the baby presented in the Temple. *For my eyes have seen Your Salvation which You have prepared in the sight of all people.* The prophetess Anna did (Luke 2:36-38) as she proclaimed the Christ Child to all who would listen at the temple court.

It seems simple on the surface. But, as Christians, we all know the true meaning of it. *Behold, the Lamb of God*, the Lamb that bears my sin, your sin, the sin of the world. Can you imagine the love that would require? *For God so loved the world... — Behold, the Lamb of God.* It boggles the mind, doesn't it? That the God of the universe would send his only Baby Son into our world to serve as the Sacrificial Lamb that would willingly purchase our salvation. Amazing grace! How great Thou art!

As we celebrate our Lord's coming this festive Christmas season, let's take a moment to remember why He came.

Behold, the Lamb of God!

Doug Upchurch

GOD'S GIFTS

Gifts come in many forms. As I drive to work early in the morning, I have the opportunity to witness the beautiful sunrise that God has planned for the day.

Whether it is rainy or sunny, He has given us this day. I am reminded of the verse,

*This is the day the Lord has made;
we will rejoice and be glad in it.*

Psalms 118:24

The day is a gift from God.

Just as God plans each day for us to rejoice in His wonder, He also purposefully planned for our salvation. He planned for Mary and Joseph to travel to Bethlehem and for Mary to give birth to Jesus. It was His plan to send His Son, Jesus, to the world. What a joy that He cared enough to give us the greatest gift of all.

As we approach the holidays, we tend to focus on gifts for our families and friends. Receiving a gift from someone you love means so much. It means that you are special, that you are loved. However, God's gift of His Son is far better than any Christmas gift that we could receive. We know that we are loved because God sent His Son to give His life for us.

No matter the time of year, the gift of salvation is there for anyone who will call upon His name and ask forgiveness. As Christians, we must continue to rediscover the wonders of the gift of salvation and rejoice.

The gift of salvation through Jesus Christ makes every day special and something to *Behold*, a precious gift from God, with new grace and new opportunities.

I am making a commitment to *open my gift of each new day* with a prayer of thankfulness and joy. Will you join me by *opening your gift* (your day) with joy and gratefulness for all that God has given you?

Pam Deering

DECEMBER 28

The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost. There's no greater love than the love Jesus Christ gave to us.

Luke 19:10

SEEK & SERVE

Christmas is about love. The love of Jesus brought down from heaven to give us the greatest gift to all mankind.

I am writing this from a hotel room in Texas after a group of us visited Vogel Alcove, a center for homeless children in Dallas that serves 200 children and their families daily, to minister to the less fortunate. It has been a blessed time of working with people who look beyond themselves to help others.

Our church is a family of believers who reach out in love to Norman and the world. We minister in many ways to our community (VBS, Summerscope, after school programs, summer camps, food pantry, clothes closet, Sunday suppers, mission trips, Funny Face Festival, Thanksgiving baskets, Christmas stockings, Giving Tree, school supplies for students, Kids' Hope, Upward Basketball, mission offerings, Christmas Eve diapers and wipes, retreats, Bible studies and inspirational music and messages to prepare and keep our hearts in tune with God's teachings.

Our Circle of Friends LifeGroup just finished our Operation Christmas Child Shoebox party where we filled 102 shoeboxes to show and tell children about the love of Jesus. He tells us, *they will know us by our love. We are to love the Lord our God and our neighbors as ourselves – whoever and wherever they are.*

Every Thursday morning, we reach out to international students by way of Friendship International, an English as a second language course. Church members serve as hostesses, drivers, and teachers. The word *Behold* means to see, observe, or witness something remarkable or impressive. These are the things that make First Baptist Church remarkable, impressive and loving.

Hebrews 10:25b tells us to *encourage one another as we see the Day approaching*. Christmas is the perfect time to show our love to others. We gather for family time, social time, and special times of worship with concerts, caroling, gift giving, and sharing God's love.

Let us continue Loving people, Teaching the Word, and Living the Journey.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.

Sallie Kennedy

DECEMBER 29



Behold!

GET UP

DECEMBER 30

ALL THE COLORS OF *Christmas*



FAMILY ACTIVITIES

THANK YOU NOTES — One of the best gifts to give children and family members is a package of thank you notes. Encourage each person to write or draw a thank you note for each gift before they get to enjoy the gift. Make this a family project! When the notes are finished, take a trip to the post office, drop off your notes, and enjoy a treat together!

SOUPS ON — Get the family involved in making several pots of soup. Place the soup in quart jars. Attach a sleeve of crackers and a sweet winter warm up note. Take a family car ride and deliver soup to people in your life that could use a warm hug!

GET UP! GET UP!

For many of you during the holidays, and Advent season, the apparent and effervescent joy all around is overwhelmed by a deep sorrow. One thing or another encumbers your ability to experience hope, faith, love, joy, and most tragically, the fullness of Christ. However, Christ knew how to suffer well, and in doing so gave proof of what would be to come.

Many of you are in severe pain this season as it is your first Advent without a dear one or even without dear ones whom you love. A parent, a peer, or perhaps unspeakably, a child is gone, that they might be with the Lord.

In the familiar passage of Jesus' resurrection of Lazarus (John 11:1-44), we meditate on v. 35 and the significance of a morsel of scripture, which for many of us, was the first that we committed to memory during our youth — *Jesus wept*. The significance of these two words recorded in scripture indicate a special aspect of our (not yet then) risen Lord, in that He is Immanuel (God with Us) in our mourning.

We are reminded that He felt as we feel, and though He was touched by Lazarus' passing, was touched even more so by Mary's pain. Let us take comfort in a God who knows our suffering, and united us with Himself in it, even unto the cross!

Behold! Just as God, through an angel, gifted to Joseph means of escape to Egypt in a terrible time of fear (Matthew 2:1-23), He offers us, too, a way out under intense peril. As thousands of precious little lives were lost at the hands of evil men, our just God sought to protect the eternal lives of countless more.

And now, after mourning amply and mourning well, compelled by the grace and provision of God, *Get Up! Get up*, and flee to refuge! Get up, and flee the destruction of sin and death! Get up, and reside in His plan that at the appointed time you might return and be a witness to the greatness of His power to the world!

Amen Holman

We all have gifts. They differ according to the grace God has given to each of us. Do you have the gift of prophecy?

Then use it according to the faith you have.

If your gift is serving, then serve. If it is teaching, then teach. Is it encouraging others? Then encourage them. Is it giving to others? Then give freely. Is it being a leader? Then work hard at it. Is it showing mercy? Then do it cheerfully.

Romans 12:6-8

ENGAGE YOUR OPPORTUNITIES

As I have served as Community Minister, I have seen God at work in the lives of people who are stuck in cycles of poverty and are desperate to take that next step toward a better life for themselves and their family.

That next step may be making a phone call about a job opportunity, searching for an available apartment, turning in paperwork for housing, a weekend class to get their driver's license restrictions cleared, or maybe a stop at DHS to get affordable daycare set up for their children. I have seen so many walk through the hurdles and take these steps. These are steps they can, and should, take on their own.

However, God also has shown me that sometimes I myself need to get up and give them a hand using the resources I have that they may not. Offering a ride to the weekend class. Using my computer to scan for a few job openings they could try. Making a phone call to someone at another organization to try to help them connect to better resources. Deciding to donate a quilt I've made instead of stockpiling them. So many little things that take maybe 10 minutes and yet can mean so much to another person who just needed a nudge. With each opportunity I had to make a conscience effort to engage, to *get up*. Through that, God uses these opportunities to reveal himself to both of us.

Each week God puts us in contact with people, all of whom need to see a bit more of Christ in their lives, ourselves included. Look for opportunities to use your skills and knowledge to engage with those God has placed in your life. It will look different in your life than mine, but make the choice to *get up*.

Angela Atkins

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ADVENT WORSHIP SERVICES

10:30 A.M.

DECEMBER 2, DECEMBER 9,
DECEMBER 16, DECEMBER 23

JOY OF GIVING

9:00 A.M.-NOON

DECEMBER 1, FAMILY LIFE CENTER

SOUNDS OF CHRISTMAS CONCERT

FEATURING VERITAS

6:00 P.M.

DECEMBER 2, SANCTUARY

SUNDAY SUPPERS

4:00 P.M.

DECEMBER 2, DECEMBER 16, HALLOCK HALL

DEACON'S BANQUET

DOORS OPEN AT 6:00, DINNER IS SERVED AT 6:30 P.M.

DECEMBER 3, HALLOCK HALL

NORMAN CHRISTMAS PARADE

6:00 P.M., DECEMBER 8

JOIN US AT 5:00 P.M. AT COMMON GROUND, 324 W. MAIN ST.

GIVING TREE

CONTINUES UNTIL DECEMBER 9

YOUTH CHRISTMAS PARTY

6:00-7:30 P.M.

DECEMBER 12, YOUTH HALL

old!

MYSTERY TRIP, ADULTS 55+

3:00-9:00 P.M.

DECEMBER 17

JINGLE BELL JAM, AGES 1-GRADE 5

5:30-9:00 P.M.

DECEMBER 19, WEST WING CHILDREN'S AREAS

NO WEDNESDAY ACTIVITIES

DECEMBER 26, JANUARY 2

HOLIDAY OPEN HOUSE

HOME OF WADE AND GAY SMITH

2:00-4:00 P.M., DECEMBER 23

WORSHIP AT 10:30 A.M.

NO LIFEGROUPS

DECEMBER 23

CHRISTMAS EVE CANDLE LIGHTING

6:00 P.M.

DECEMBER 24

FLC AND CHURCH OFFICE CLOSED

DECEMBER 24 - DECEMBER 25

JANUARY 1

WEDNESDAY EVENING ACTIVITIES RESUME

JANUARY 9, 2019



First Baptist Norman

211 W. Comanche St.

FBCNORMAN.ORG