

Marvelous Light

Advent 2021



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*Written **BY** and **FOR** this faith community*

A special thanks to all the contributors of this book. Thank you for sharing your stories, faith, joys, struggles, and hope with the rest of us. A humble reminder we do not walk alone.

*Lo, in the silent night
A child to God is born
And all is brought again
That ere was lost or lorn.*

*Could but thy soul, O man,
Become a silent night!
God would be born in thee
And set all things aright.*

(15th Century, from the frontispiece,
Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas)

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**Advent devotion adapted from Christian literature*

Introduction

God is in the manger, wealth in poverty, light in darkness, succor in abandonment. No evil can befall us; whatever men may do to us, they cannot but serve the God who is secretly revealed as love and rules the world and our lives."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Advent has been observed by Christians for centuries as a time to think about Christ's birth and prepare our hearts for His coming. The word *advent* literally means "arrival". But it seems as if today we are so busy with shopping, plan-making, parties, and other activities clamoring for our attention. We are in the "holiday season" which may lead you to believe we're all kicking our shoes off and taking a good rest but nothing could be further from the truth. We're running at breakneck speed just to keep up, and if we're not careful we look up at the calendar and Christmas has passed us by.

Sometimes I feel like I'm trying to hold onto Christmas, to stop time so it won't be over. Of course I love the extended time I get to spend with family and friends, the parties, the music, the goodwill, and the beauty of the lights. But it goes deeper than that. I want to hold onto Christmas because I've spent so much time and energy on stuff that has nothing to do with God coming into our midst, and I feel like the sacredness of the moment is slipping through my fingers.

Mother Teresa talks about how the first person to welcome Jesus was John the Baptist who leaped for joy upon recognizing him, though both of them were still in their mothers' wombs. In an age of endless distractions, I fear we are far too often captivated by the superficial as the presence of God goes unrecognized.

May that not be true of us this Advent season. May we seek to know and experience the goodness of God made manifest in the coming of Jesus. May we smile in the mystery of Immanuel and leap for joy at the miracle of Jesus. The One who has come to save us and the One who will come again one day to make all things new.

You'll notice that we have a devotion for every day of Advent and four different themes for each week: hope, peace, joy, and love. My prayer is for you to use this book as your guide through the Advent season as all of us become more keenly aware of God's presence within us and around us. But don't just keep it to yourself. If you are moved, challenged, or encouraged by a devotion, act on it! Obey what Holy Spirit is prompting you to do. Go love, serve, give, bless, encourage, forgive, or befriend someone.

This year, we've included some Advent devotions from Christian authors that have shaped us as ministers. These selections from Frederick Buechner and Madeleine L'Engle are powerful. We hope you enjoy these contributions in addition to those of our church family!

November 28

Used by God

Sarah Stewart

There is a brilliant, brave, and ridiculously tall young girl in our church. We've all watched her grow up and this past Easter we witnessed her public profession of faith and baptism. She wrestled with her decision to follow Christ for about a year and had many deep conversations filled with questions and doubts. I say all that to say, she is growing up in this church where she feels loved and she knows it's safe to questions.



This November as I ran back and forth between two quarantined sick boys, weary from the week, I got a picture of that same girl working on bracelets for the church. She heard that I wanted to have reminder prayer bracelets for the church family to wear during our month of prayer in January. **She heard of a need, thought she could help, and she did something about it.** What a picture of hope that is for me. The church was such a safe place for her that she believed she had something she could offer to help all of us grow. There is so much work to be done. The Kingdom of God needs more people willing to say yes when they see a need. Willing to jump in and serve others in Jesus' name.

Oh, may we all feel that way. May we grow in our faith and always believe God can use us to help others grow. This Advent season, I encourage you to have the same heart as Madelyn Malony. Look for ways to serve those around you. Remember that we are invited to live out our faith in our words and our actions. *"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

Sarah is the Pastor of FBCOKC. She and her husband, Brad, have served the church since 2008. They have three boys named Noah, Luke, and Griffin. She loves being the pastor of this beautiful church. Something you may not know about Sarah is nothing. You know everything!

November 29

Christmas in Saigon

Pam Williams

***"and they shall name him Emmanuel,"
which means, "God is with us."
Matthew 1:23b***



Did you know that, as a young college graduate, I served alongside career missionaries in Vietnam? For two years my home was Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City), the capital of this war-torn country. The Vietnam Mission office was located in Saigon with its purpose being to support missionaries and ministries throughout the country. It was through many responsibilities in and without this office that I invested my life for those two years as a Missionary Journeyman. I have said over and over again: it was a pivotal life experience for me! Thanks be to God.

Have you ever thought what it would be like to live in a country that did not celebrate Christmas? Why would they celebrate? It was a mostly Buddhist country with only a very few of the two million people living in my neighborhood having ever heard the name of Jesus the Christ, our Emmanuel. Christmas was just another day in the week for them. As my first Christmas in Vietnam approached, a feeling of deep sadness surrounded me.

The sadness wasn't for myself but for my neighbors who hadn't heard about the greatest gift that ever graced this world: Jesus Christ. Though there were no outer signs of Christmas that year, the light of Christ burned from within, assuring me that God was indeed with me . With us. Working God's will and way, each and every day. The light of Christ would guide the way, wherever we were, to the celebration.

As a new member of the FBCOKC family, this is my first Advent season to journey with you in the preparation for Christ's coming into the world. It is a time of hope and celebration! My neighborhood looks different than it did those many years ago in Saigon. (Yet, my new next door neighbors are Vietnamese!) There are signs of Christmas sprouting up everywhere. Look around your neighborhood as we make this Advent journey. How many of our neighbors know and celebrate the real meaning of Christmas? How might God lead us to share the Light of the World, the priceless Gift of Jesus Christ, with the neighborhood? Our Emmanuel, will light the way!

Pam Williams is a retired minister having served churches in Missouri, Virginia and Louisiana. A native Oklahoman, Pam graduated from Capitol Hill High School in Oklahoma City where she lettered in four sports.

November 30

Hope in Action

Scott Sigler

Hope is a wonderful thing. During times of trouble, we pray and hope for the best, often times praying for what we think is the best. Many times our hopes are unrealistic, as I have discovered this past year. Both my father and then my mother were diagnosed with cancer. As a result of our increased presence going to and from doctor's visits, we discovered that my dad has dementia. It's the type that creates paranoia, anger, and mean behavior.



I have prayed for a turn around. I have prayed for some medication that would help stabilize the situation. I have prayed that the problem would go away because it was tearing me up emotionally. I was praying for protection for my mom and the rest of my family who routinely are subject to physical and emotional abuse. I hoped God would answer my prayers.

Psalms 33 vs 20 says "We wait in hope for the Lord: he is our help and our shield. After more than a year of hoping for an answer, God helped me realize that what I hoped for was unrealistic, and that the answers were more complicated. His answer came in the form of a Facebook post from my sister-in-law which showed me that it is my approach to the situation which needs to change. After waiting so long, my help and my shield that God has provided are actions that I can take for my father. Here is her post about dementia:

1. *Agree, never argue*
2. *Divert, never reason*
3. *Distract, never shame*
4. *Reassure, never lecture*
5. *Reminisce, never say "remember"*
6. *Repeat, never say "I told you"*
7. *Do what they can do, never say "you can't"*
8. *Ask, never demand*
9. *Encourage, never condescend*
10. *Reinforce, never force*

God is truly our help and our shield...When you hope this Christmas, hope to see God's will in things.

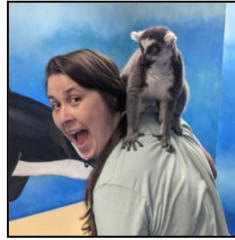
Scot serves as a Deacon and in the choir at FBCOKC. He and his stunningly beautiful wife, Ginger, came to FBC a few years ago on a whim, to see "Amal and the Night Visitors," and decided this church family is a special place where people can be real and love God and each other. Something you may not know about Scot is that although he has sung with three symphony choruses, and led music for many years at a church in Norman, he cannot remember the lyrics to any song he has ever sung. Not one!

December 1

A Kingdom Hope

Jennifer Nath

I recently turned 35. While not a major milestone in life, it nonetheless caused me to reflect. I am far from the life I had hoped for when I was younger and that is excluding the state of the world. Life has taken me down paths I did not imagine.



Some of them have been amazing. I have gotten to travel the world, go to seminary, make great friends, and explore new passions. But it has sent me down some very dark paths, probably darker than sometimes I want to admit to myself. I lost my dream job and with it my community, my livelihood, my security, my calling, and most importantly my identity. Things looked pretty hopeless.

As I look back at these darker moments in my life, I see now how hope comes from a point of struggle. Before, hope seemed easy. Hope was nothing more than kind words or a slogan on home decor. It had little actual meaning. It was in those deep valleys of sadness, grief, and depression that I began to realize what hope is. Hope manifests itself in moments of joy. It is in those moments we experience what could be and begin to yearn for that joy to be everlasting and eternal. I used to hope for things that were expected milestones: job, relationships, family, house, cars, and markers of success.

When this was my hope, I found myself disappointed. Yet as my perspective on what I hoped for But what I hope for now has shifted from these earthly things to the hopes of God: things like justice, love, equality, equity, and peace.

My understanding grew and it became easier to rejoice, easier to seek and fight for the things I hope for. I no longer hope for my benefit, but for the benefit of every child of God. It's shifted from MY kingdom to the eternal Kingdom of God. During this Advent and Christmastide seasons, I hope you find joy in the knowledge of the kingdom that is to come and become a beacon of hope to all you encounter.

As for me, I will always have hope; I will praise you more and more.-
Psalm 71:14

Jennifer is an OKC native, Baylor and Truett Seminary graduate. She is an Event and Facilities Manager at the Oklahoma City Fairgrounds. She is an avid fan of the Houston Astros, New York Rangers, and all Baylor Bear sports. She is also a huge pop culture junkie so much that her cat is named Tobi Meowquire.

December 2

The Armor of Light

Frederick Buechner (Author)

Give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which thy son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility: that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty, to judge both the quick and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal.

- Book of Common Prayer

All the paradoxical themes of Advent are compressed into that handful of words: Christ coming at Christmas time in great humility and again at the end of time in glorious majesty—Christ coming as a child to save us and as a king to judge us—mortal life, immortal life. They clatter against each other like shutters in the wind with all their points and counterpoints. They all but deafen us with their message at one and the same time of sin and grace, justice and mercy, comfort and challenge. "Cast away the works of darkness," they say, and put on "the armor of light." Maybe those are the words that best sum up the paradox of who we are and where we are. Somewhere between

the darkness and the light. That is where we are as Christians. And not just at Advent time, but at all times. Somewhere between the fact of darkness and the hope of light. That is who we are.

"Advent" means "coming" of course, and the promise of Advent is that what is coming is an unimaginable invasion. The mythology of our age has to do with flying saucers and invasions from outer space, and that is unimaginable enough. But what is upon us now is even more so—a close encounter not of the third kind but of a different kind altogether. An invasion of *holiness*. That is what Advent is about.

What is coming upon the world is the Light of the World. It is Christ. That is the comfort of it. The challenge of it is that it has not come yet. Only the hope for it has come, only the longing for it. In the meantime we are in the dark, and the dark, God knows, is also in us. We watch and wait for a holiness to heal us and hallow us, to liberate us from the dark. Advent is like the hush in a theater just before the curtain rises. It is like the hazy ring around the winter moon that means the coming of snow which will turn the night to silver. Soon. But for the time being, our time, darkness is where we are.

- Originally published in *"The Clown in the Belfry"*

December 3

Unbroken

Abby Pena

Even though I tell others to “have hope”, I, myself struggle with it. During my cancer journey, I found out quickly that I HAD to hold onto hope if I was going to get through the ordeal. I was able to remain positive, clinging to hope that I could tolerate the treatments and they would work, and hope that my prognosis would be NED (no evidence of disease).



Well, I am beyond thrilled to have the joy of just celebrating my 9th year of being cancer-free and my 10th year of being a cancer survivor! I hoped for the best news, and I received it - NOT because I deserved it, but because of God's mercy. As a result, my ministry has been to encourage others going through cancer, offering them hope and optimism.

Deep inside us, God has placed a Spirit that refuses to be broken - and we call this hope.

*"We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure."
Hebrews 6:19*

I've been married to my soulmate, Armando for 51 blissful years! We have two grown daughters, Veronica and Stephanie and a "son-in-love." We are still praying for grandchildren. I taught elementary school for 35 years. Scrapbooking and card ministry occupies most of my time. Been a member of FBC about 10 plus years.

December 4

Found in Him

Kevin Driskill

I am filled with hope and joy in this Advent season because I transferred my trust to Jesus when I was very young. On January 11, 1975, I prayed to ask Jesus to be my Savior and Lord. I was very young and have come to understand more about what happened as my faith has been strengthened and as I lean on Jesus through good and bad times.



One of the most comforting things is that my hope is found in Him and not in me. Even after years of serving and growing I am still far from perfect. If I had to trust in my own merits or my ability to stay 100% focused in my spiritual walk I would be doomed. I seek to serve Him and His Church, but life still happens. I get discouraged or distracted and must refocus on Jesus continually. During my weak times I find hope because He is perfect even though I am not. If I sin, I trust in my sinless Savior. If I have worries or doubts, I trust in the One Who is ever faithful. I call on Him for help if I feel helpless and try to be more like Him when I am impatient or self-absorbed. He is my one and only hope. I do not divide my trust between Jesus and other things but place it all in Him.

I love the fact that I don't have a plan "B" because I know He is sufficient to save me to the uttermost and I need look no

other place. I celebrate His coming and I celebrate His saving me. Many seasons of life have been too much for me to bear alone.

Jesus has been with me, encouraged me, and strengthened me all the way. I have great hope and joy because my experience with Him through all the crazy times in my life is proof that He will always be there for me until I see Him face to face.

I was born and raised in Pauls Valley Oklahoma. I have traveled extensively but I have always come back to the Pauls Valley area. My Wife Lisa and I live Northeast of Pauls Valley on a small acreage with our two puppies Rocky and Rascal. We found FBC OKC because we heard Sarah was going to be the Pastor and we began praying for her and her family in this new calling. I was pastor at the time, but God led me to step down and find a church to attend. As we had been praying for FBC OKC and the Stewarts we visited there first. We loved it immediately and have found a loving church home there and many good friends.

December 5

A Life of Shalom

Donna Gatewood

The Hebrew word for peace is shalom. The definition of peace is a state of tranquility or quiet, freedom from civil disturbance, harmony in personal relations, and a period in which there is no war. Peace. What a glorious word when our personal lives are in great shape and the world around us feels free from turmoil. The past eighteen months have felt anything but peaceful as we have dealt with the pandemic, workplace shutdowns, and the questions of equality and inclusion. We try to look at the big picture relating to our world, but sometimes we forget to look at ourselves. Are our own lives peaceful? Are our lives full of anxiety? Is it time to focus on our own inner peace?



What a wonderful feeling when we do have inner peace. Even with my faith as a child of God, I need reminding of the words in Philippians 4:6-7: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, 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.”

What a comfort those words are to me. We have situations in our lives that can make us anxious and troubled. Sometimes that anxiety involves our health or the health of a loved one. It can also come from job changes or concerns. When I read that scripture and hand my troubles over to God, I know I can focus and have clarity on the things I need to take care of. I know that I don't have to deal with anything by myself.

Prayer, thanksgiving, and peace. What incredible words these are. With prayer and thanksgiving, God can supply us with the peace that will guard our hearts and minds. How simple God has made it for us. All that is asked of us is prayer and thanksgiving. When the world feels so scary, ask Jesus to bring peace to you. Maybe we can become the peacemakers the world needs.

Donna volunteers with the 1st-5th grade Sunday School and Cares4OKC. Donna is the Front of House Manager at the Civic Center Music Hall and a lifelong resident of Oklahoma City. She has been at FBCOKC since 2002 when she was invited by a neighbor to attend services. Something you may not know about Donna is that she has a competitive streak. There was a time when you couldn't keep her away from a contest that involved making delicious baked goods or Mexican food, and, sewing or holiday crafts.

December 6

A Foretaste of Heaven

Rick Johnson

What is peace (Hebrew: *shalom*; Greek: *irene*)? It is the state of wholeness, completeness, health, and well-being that comes from being in a covenant with God. In ourselves, we are not whole, but Jesus is our peace (Eph. 2:14).



He is making us whole, and on the way he gives us anticipations of what that will be.

I preached a youth revival during spring break in my freshman year at Louisiana College. On the Saturday morning we went to a park for fellowship, prayer, and Bible study. On my way there I drove by a country church that was picturesque. Red brick and white steeple against a background of pine forest. I was so struck by the beauty of the scene that a prayer leaped into my mind. "Lord, let me preach in that church." I left it there and didn't think about it anymore after that. It wasn't a big issue. No crisis was at stake. It might seem frivolous. I didn't tell anyone about it.

A few weeks later, I received a call from the pastor of Houston River Baptist Church. I had never heard of the church. I don't remember how the pastor heard of me. But he asked me if I would come preach a youth revival that summer. I was glad to get another opportunity. It was a few months later when the revival took place. I followed the directions the pastor gave me to find the church. As I drove up, when the church came into view, the scene struck me again, and I recognized the building and remembered my earlier prayer. I think the invitation had come within a month of that brief wish.

I don't remember the results of the revival. But I remember the impression the fulfillment of my prayer made on my mind and spirit. It was a small moment of completion that gave me reassurance that I was indeed following the call the Lord had on my life. The moments of wholeness and well-being God gives us on our journey are previews of the perfect completion to come when the fullness of his kingdom comes. That is peace.

Rick Johnson is a resident fellow of B. H. Carroll Theological Institute. He taught previously at Wayland Baptist University, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and East Texas Baptist University. He is married to Martha Johnson. They have two daughters, Cherise and Victoria, and three granddaughters, Madelyn, Alexandra, and Isabella. Rick loves music, reading, and playing with his girls.

December 7

A Song to Sing

Ariel Koerner

Peace is freedom from disturbance; tranquility. At times, I feel my life is full of disturbance. In those moments there is one way I find peace and that is music. It is my escape from anxiety and drive for peace. In Philippians 4 verses 6-7 it says, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your request to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."



Anxiety can take over my life so quickly but lifting my anxious thoughts through songs of thanksgiving to God give me peace. One song that has been on my heart this past year is "Thank You" by Pentatonix. Most of you know the kind of year I have been through. It has not been a peaceful year. This song reminds me to thank God because He got me through this crazy year. The lyrics say, *"Thank you for your smile it's warmer than the fire. Your gentle laughter is sweeter than a choir. I can't believe this year you've got me through. The least I can do is thank you."*

Sometimes all you can do is sing thanks to God. In another meaningful song, the lyrics say, *Sometimes nothing left to give becomes the sweetest offering. Sometimes choosing just to sing is the thing that changes everything.* There is truth in that statement. Choose to sing in moments of anxiety or chaos. Singing, whether on pitch or not, can change your mood and your outlook. As we prepare for the birth of Jesus, sing to him. Feel peace knowing Jesus came as a baby to save us of our sin.

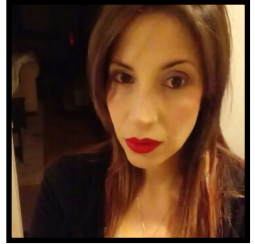
Ariel is the Minister for Young Families at FBCOKC. She has been in this role since August 2021 but has been a member of this church since she was a child. Ariel has a degree in music, voice emphasis and after college she met her husband, David. They were married in the beautiful sanctuary at FBCOKC on December 1, 2018. Ariel loves FBCOKC. It is her home. These people are her family. Something you may not know about Ariel is that she was not named after the Little Mermaid, but after a character in Shakespeare's play, "The Tempest".

December 8

Let Jesus Carry the Weight

Holly Murphy

A few years ago I struggled with intense anxiety. I feel like it hit me like a ton of bricks out of nowhere. Some days it was manageable and other days it was a nightmare. I remember driving to band practice one night and the intrusive thoughts I was having felt debilitating. I started to cry and I called out to God. I asked him to please make all of the horrible thoughts stop and he did. I remember feeling a huge weight lifted. At that time in my life I didn't pray a whole lot.



I pray a lot more consistently now and I feel a sense of calm even when my prayers are difficult to get out. I still battle anxiety but I've learned to let Jesus carry the weight when I can't. Trust in hope even in the dark times. God works in mysterious ways and he will always hold your hand even when you are lost.

Holly Murphy has been married a little over a year to the love of her life, Brian Murphy. Pastor Sarah Stewart actually officiated their wedding in the Parlor at FBC on Aug 1st of 2020. Holly is a local musician and she also works as a medical receptionist for a home health agency. Holly loves yoga and coffee!

December 9

An Unmatchable Gift

Bill Harrison

I hear people say "Christmas has become too secular, too commercial, it's not like it used to be." I nod in agreement as I think of Christmas displays and movies with no mention of Christ. Then I think back to my childhood Christmases (a long time ago) and realize that things were just the same then. Oh, there are more media outlets and more things to buy, but it was still very commercial.



So how did we come to make Christmas a time of giving? At Christ's birth the only outsiders were shepherds, who were too poor to bring gifts. They came to worship. The Magi showed up later with gifts, some ominous (a whole other story), but they weren't there at the birth. So why should we be giving gifts? The apostle John gives us the reason: God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that everyone who has faith in him may not perish but have eternal life (NEB). We should be giving in honor of God's great gift to mankind, a gift which we cannot match. Let us remember with each gift we give that we are the receiver of the greatest gift, our redeemer.

I was born in Albuquerque, NM. My father was an Air Force chaplain and Baptist Minister. I lived in western Oklahoma before moving to Okemah, Oklahoma where I spent my childhood. I was baptized at Calvary Baptist Church in Okemah. My freshman year I moved to the Midwest City area and graduated from Star Spencer High School, then went to Oklahoma Baptist University, graduating with a degree in mathematics. I spent two tours in the army (including a tour in Vietnam) and then spent over thirty-five years as a logistics systems analyst at Tinker AFB. I joined FBCOKC in 1984 and have served as a deacon as well as director of the old Adult I (formerly Adult III) Sunday School department.

December 10

Peace in the Pain

Suzanne Cox

When I was asked to write something for this year's advent devotions book, heard that along with the piece with a brief autobiography and a photo of myself, to include something most people don't know about me. There is something few people know, and it proved to be a perfect jumping off place for this piece. I have been in pain every single day for almost 41 years. The reason most people don't know about it is that I have very rarely talked about it. This story is about what happened when I hurt my back in December, 1979. I was 21 years old and in my last year of college.

Long story short. It was finals time, I had two finals back-to-back with a 20 minute window between the two exams. I was running from the classroom in the library to a classroom in the Arts and Sciences Building and took a shortcut through two parking lots. The two parking lots were back to back, but the second was about 18 inches higher than the first. I jumped up to the second lot and my left foot hit the pavement, a pebble rolled under my foot.

I tried to regain my balance by jerking my body back and something happened. White hot pain. I had never felt pain like that, and I knew instantly I was really hurt. But I got up and continued to the next exam. Last year, on Monday, April 6, I woke up, got out of bed, and my left leg buckled. I fell back onto the bed. My leg was completely numb, but my back hurt worse than ever before, even worse than that day in '79.

It was the week of the candidate filing period, which is not the week to call in sick if you work at the State Election Board. I struggled with increasing pain all week. By Friday evening, I was exhausted, nauseated, and scared. I left the Capitol Building after 10 pm that night and was due back on Saturday morning at 8:30. I worked until nearly 3:30. When I left, I didn't know if I could get to my car and was certain I shouldn't be behind the wheel. But everyone else had left without telling me. I was completely alone.

Well. Maybe not completely alone. When I left the office and started limping to the outer door, I started praying, sincerely: "Please God, help me get to the car." I got to the car. I climbed in and cried for a while. Then I prayed, "Please God help me get home without killing myself or someone else." And I got home safely. I managed to crawl upstairs and I fell (fortunately) on my bed. I think I was unconscious when I hit the mattress. I woke up about 2 hours later.

I was off work for the first couple of days the next week. I got an appointment with my primary care physician on Tuesday morning. I told him about the previous week, how intense the pain had become, that I was at 8 on the pain scale almost all day Saturday and was above 9 when I got home Saturday afternoon. He gave me a steroid injection, sent me down the hall for an x-ray, and offered to refer me to a pain management specialist.

The reason I rarely ever talked about my back pain is simple. No one – not even family – ever believed me. I did talk to my doctors about it. They also didn't believe me. I was too young and thin to have a back problem, then I just needed to lose 10 pounds and exercise. Over the years, the amount of weight I needed to lose increased, and no one was ever concerned when I said that my pain gets worse when I exercise.

But my current doctor listened to me that day. He ordered an x-ray. He gave me an injection that helped, and I went back to teleworking. When the injection began wearing off, I got the referral for pain management. I received an injection every 2-3 weeks until late July, when the pain doctor said that I'd had enough injections to show that injections alone could not help me long-

term. He said he could get my insurance to approve two radio frequency ablations – procedures to shock the most troublesome nerves in my lumbar spine. I had the RFA's in August 2020, and had several months of relief – not pain free, but pain reduced to a manageable level of approximately 3 on the pain scale. That's about the level I'd been living with since the original injury. It felt wonderful!

I had another steroid injection in January this year because my left leg still hurt most of the time and was frequently numb. By late July, I needed another round of injections. I realized that I do not want to live the rest of my life between injections and nerve zaps. I wanted an answer, a solution, and most of all, I wanted someone to believe me.

I called my primary doctor and made another appointment. We talked about the pain level rising and that I knew I could go back to the pain guy. He said it's time for an MRI. The day after the MRI, I got a message from him that he was going to refer me to a neurosurgeon.

When I saw the neurosurgeon the first time, he told me two wonderful things – I didn't have to convince him I'm in pain because he could see all causes of my pain in the MRI and also that he believed he could help me. I saw him again a month later, after he reviewed the CT scans he'd ordered. He'd learned from the CTs that when I was laying on my back during the CT scans, my spine normalized and straightened. Upon seeing that, he decided we could pursue a less extreme surgical solution than he recommended during our first visit.

Despite my prayers last April, despite a deep belief that God is always with me, I haven't actually felt peace in a long time. Over years, as my pain grew steadily worse and people around me believed me less, despite decades of doctors refusing to take me or my pain seriously, and as my lifelong chronic major depression deepened and threatened more than once to pull me so far down into the deep, dark place that I would never be able to find my way out again, I found little true peace of any kind, anywhere. And then, the neurosurgeon sat down across from me and said "I believe you are in pain because I see all the reasons for the pain" did I begin to feel peace. Even though I'm still in pain, don't know when I can have the surgery, or how long it will take me to recover, I am at peace with what is coming.

I am not afraid. I am not worried. I know God is with me. I may be living more than 2000 years after Jesus lived and died on the cross, but I feel him carrying

me now when the pain is keeping me from walking with my own strength. I feel hopeful. He is with me, and I know how peace feels.

My name is Suzanne Cox. Born and raised in Mangum, Oklahoma, I began writing stories when I was in the third grade. I have been a technical and legal writer for the State Election Board since 1983. I wrote two novellas and the first draft of a novel many years ago, and hope finish and polish them all for publication after I retire two years from now. I moved to Oklahoma City after college and joined FBC-OKC in 1985.

December 11

A Christmas Truce

Cole Rankin

A Christmas Truce - December 25, 1914

For Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us. Ephesians 2:14



I have always had a deep love of history, especially when it comes to battles (as you can see from much of my childhood artwork.) I think little boys inherently have an interest in conflict. In 1997 a Christmas song came out by one of my favorite artists at the time, Garth Brooks, called “Belleau Wood”. I would encourage you to go ahead Google it and give it a quick listen if you’ve never heard it before. As corny as it may seem, this song sets the scene quite well.

Five months into the “War to End All Wars”, the British and German forces had come to a stalemate in the “Race to the Sea” and were now facing the horrors of trench warfare. They began to realize that they were sorely mistaken in their battle cry, “Over by Christmas”, and most of them would never see home again. Suddenly, something spontaneously happened on that bloody battlefield all down line. I will let Pvt. Albert Moren, a British soldier, set the scene for you:

“It was a beautiful moonlit night, frost on the ground, white almost everywhere: and at about 7 or 8 in the evening there was a lot of commotion in the German trenches and there were these lights -- I don't

know what they were. And then they sang, "Silent Night" - "Stille Nacht." I shall never forget it; it was one of the highlights of my life. I thought, what a beautiful tune."

This act of faith and memory of home set off a chain of goodwill all along both trenches as these combatants saw each other's humanity. Men who had been trying to kill each other not long ago suddenly emerged from their trenches to meet in the middle of "no man's land." Even though there was a language barrier gifts were exchanged, songs were sung, fallen comrades were recovered, and a soccer match even happened. It did not last long, however, and all too soon the soldiers had to return to their lives of rifle fire, barrages, and screeching whistles as they "went over the top."

One month prior to this, Winston Churchill wrote to his wife:

"What would happen, I wonder, if the armies suddenly and simultaneously went on strike and said some other method must be found of settling the dispute!"

I believe God shines through situations, even in the bleakest of times, and gives us a chance to choose **PEACE**. What would our world look like if those soldiers had chosen not to leave that middle ground they found on that day, a day in remembrance of our savior. For **PEACE** is dangerous to those who want to be combative. By the following Christmas, the truce was banned under threat of court martial for any soldier on either side who dared to fraternize with the enemy.

How many of you find yourself entrenched this Christmas season? Could it be a political side, theological differences, friend/family squabbles, or maybe just within your own soul and mind? God is giving you an opportunity during this season to put aside the things that divide us and to celebrate and embrace the things we all hold dear. This is the road to **PEACE**.

Garth Brooks ends his song:

"But for just one fleeting moment

The answer seemed so clear

Heaven's not beyond the clouds

It's just beyond the fear

No, heaven's not beyond the clouds

It's for us, to find it, here"

"I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid." John 14:27

Cole Rankin works for Social Security Disability as a Disability Examiner and his wife, Debbie, works for The Academy of Classical Christian Studies as the Event Coordinator of the Midtown Campus located at FBCOKC. The Rankins joined FBCOKC in 2011 and have since added two more to the cradle roll with their amazing kiddos, Maddie and Duncan. Cole grew up on a working ranch and later became a videographer for a national TV show. A deep love for the outdoors has always been a big part of his life and he will never pass up a good fishing trip. Cole and Debbie both love to share their creative and technical abilities in a variety of ways in service of the Church.

December 12

Home for Christmas

Jim Hall

It was 1942 and World War 2 was just getting started. Dimon, my older brother, had ben drafted into the army. It was Christmas Eve and we were in the small community of Friendship, Missouri. Almost everyone was at church. All the cotton had been picked and, besides, there was no other place to go. The pastor talked a lot about Advent. I was seven years old and didn't know what he was talking about and didn't care much. I wanted to get to more important things such as handing out the presents under the big Christmas tree. It was in the northwest corner of the building. The kids had drawn names and there was a present for each of them. All the kids got a small paper sack with an apple and an orange in it along with some candy. We rode home the two miles from church in our 1928 Model A



car. We were cold because the car had no heater. Papa started a fire in the coal stove. I put a rubber band on the red hot stove. Everyone thought the house was on fire.

I remember that Advent season and I'm 86 years old. This story has never been told before. I ask for the Lord Jesus to come this Advent just like we asked Him to come that Advent so many years ago. Come, Lord Jesus, come. We need you.

December 13

In the Waiting

Toni Adams

Recently the Bible study class that I teach studied about Hannah in 1 Samuel Chapter 1. Hannah was praying so desperately and deliberately for a baby. Year after year she was taunted, provoked, and made to feel unworthy because she could not have children.



But God.....

Hannah came to the tabernacle to pray to God. She entered the tabernacle sad, depressed, barren, lost and hopeless. She prayed and she realized that she was not a worthless or useless woman like she assumed. I believe that Hannah had come to the end of herself and had come to the only one who could handle her situation. Scripture says she left that day no longer sad but was filled with joy.

She went in one way and left another way. Hannah left that day not

knowing if God would change her circumstances and give her a baby but she had an overwhelming sense of Joy. This is the beauty and mystery of the gospel. We realize that we can no longer handle life so we cry out to God in desperation. It is God who helps us feel worthy to come before his very throne. We can leave a different person just like Hannah. Transformed.

I believe the transformation in her that day was finding God in the midst of her barrenness and pain. She trusted in a God who was bigger than her circumstance.

Almost two years ago, our children started the process of adoption. Yes, our family so desperately wanted a child to be a part of our family. For this child we prayed. We had no idea when or how God would answer our prayers. All we knew is that we had to leave it with God.

But there was joy in the waiting because my children believe in God and his provision; because I am surrounded by a loving family and many friends who believed and supported us in prayer that we would have a baby added to our family someday. In March of 2021, our family received a call that a little baby girl was ready to come into our family. Unspeakable joy filled my heart. We found ourselves finally holding our long awaited blessing.

Two years ago, Meredith, my daughter in law wrote an advent story which ended with –

“If Nathan and I never have a baby of our own, we still have hope because of the wonders God has already laid on our doorstep – beautiful children through fostering, ministry, and the classroom, neighbors who have become like family, and a faith community that never stops supporting and challenging us.”

Yes, we celebrate the baby Jesus this season - For unto you a child is born. This birth helps us pray to the one who can take our sorrow and turn it into pure joy. With God, all things are possible.

Toni has the privilege of working at FBCOKC as a ministry associate. She has been a member at FBCOKC along with her husband Mike for the past six years. Toni enjoys

teaching her Bible study class and singing in the choir. Her children are Nathan, Meredith and Brittain. She has one granddaughter, Josephine who at the young age of 8 ½ months has brought her pure joy. Toni loves fashion but in all honesty her favorite outfit consists of sweat pants.

December 14

Good News of Great Joy

Brad Stewart

The word “joy” is just three letters long and one short syllable. It can be said in a single breath; it is rather small in stature compared to other words we say every day. But for being so small, its weight is heavy and it refuses to be ignored when uttered in a conversation. It is an elusive word; sometimes it seems to be just within our grasp, yet at other times it falls to the floor, gets lost in the cushions of the couch or gets washed away by all the other words that consume our lives.



It's one of those words we know we need but don't know exactly how to get. Is it just another word for “happiness” or do its roots go deeper than that? If we're honest, we'll admit that sometimes joy is more of a hope than a reality in our lives. It's here and then it is gone again just as fast. It's just three letters long, one short syllable, but it is an important word.

We find this word in the birth narrative of Luke's Gospel. Chapter 2:9 -11 says, “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.” The angel

packs quite a bit into these verses, but here's what we can't miss: the good news of Jesus coming, of God with us, will cause GREAT JOY.

The incarnation, at its essence, is an act of unspeakable joy - our Creator loving us so much that he sends his one and only son to save us - **meant to cause great joy** - in us who are His creation.

There's a lot that could be said about how joy manifests itself in our lives as followers of Jesus. But for our purposes, I want to focus on this. Here's your task this Advent: discover what thing(s) bring you joy. What makes your heart sing?

And when you discover how God has wired you to experience joy in this world, go and do those things for His glory. May you be filled with the joy of the good news this Christmas: the news that Jesus has come and the world (and you) will never be the same again.

Brad is the Minister for Discipleship at FBCOKC. He and his wife, Sarah, have called FBCOKC home since 2008. They have three boys (Noah (11), Luke (8), and Griffin (4) and a mischievous puppy named Lily. Something you may not know about Brad is once sat next to Shirley MacLaine on a flight. He didn't know her real name but he whispered to Sarah, "I'm sitting next to Weezer from Steele Magnolias!" Shirley overheard him and laughed.

December 15

Deeper

Lauren Capraro

Joy. What does that word mean to you? Some might say it's similar to happiness, but it's deeper than that.

During this advent season, I am filled with happiness. There are many wonderful things happening in my life: we are welcoming the birth of our first child next year, I started a great job that I love, and we recently moved back to Oklahoma City after being in Norman for a few years. These life circumstances are positive



and I feel happy when I think upon these things. On the contrary, I was very unhappy during last year's advent season. There were many grief-filled moments and difficult life events that weren't easy to get through.

Happiness is surface level. It's very dependent on our surroundings, the people in our lives, and what season of life we're in. That brings me back to the topic of joy. Is it possible to be joyful during trials? I'd argue yes. During that tough season last year, joy was all I had. Joy comes from a perfectly timed hymn that softens your heart, the crisp breeze while walking in God's creation, and having sweet family and friends to comfort you when the tears won't stop. True joy doesn't come from this world or our circumstances, it comes from the Lord. Happiness is fleeting, but joy from the Lord is everlasting. Let Him hold you in both the good and bad times.

I'll leave you with Psalm 30:11-12. "You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent. Lord my God, I will praise you forever."

Lauren Capraro is the Marketing and Website Manager for the national Suicide Prevention Resource Center. She and her husband, CJ, have attended FBC OKC since 2014. She loves photography, quilting, piano, and spending time with CJ and their two fluffy cats. Something you might not know about her is she played snare drum in her high school marching band and was part of the school's only all-female drumline.

December 16

A Miracle

Larry Ray

Joy to the World! The angels proclaim the Christmas Gift to the world. For me, that gift is in the form of Grace. I grew up learning all the church things about how to be a Christian. Read the bible, tithe (That's an important one), attend Church, bible study weekend, prayer meetings as long as you participated verbally, etc.... Youth



ministers made sure I didn't smoke, drink, or go with girls that did. When I started my corporate career, I was chosen to say the obligatory prayers at meetings and seminars because I was the one who went to church.

All that failed me when I was in a very dark time in my life. I could not do enough Christian things to get rid of the hopelessness and loneliness I felt. My life was not worth living and I felt abandoned by God. I made plans accordingly. In a desperate last attempt, I bared myself before God. My prayer was this: "Ok God, here is my plan and I am going to do it. If you have a better plan you better do it."

Within a week, He did a miracle. It is too long to tell about it here but it happened. Things got better and I regained my hope. God had not abandoned me. He was waiting for me. I did nothing to make this happen but I really needed it. Have things always been rosy since then? Yeah, right! Actually, worse things came along after that but I never again had that feeling of hopelessness or loneliness.

There are thousands of books on how to live a Christian life. Churches have seminars and weekend retreats. I had pastors and friends giving me advice on what I needed to do to fix the problem. Just because it worked for them didn't mean it would work for me. What "fixed" it was a personal relationship with the Creator God. His power and love given with no strings attached. I could do nothing to earn that, I just accepted it fully. We just have to ask Him.

Muslims, Jews, and other religions have rules, Christians have Grace. This Christmas embrace that freedom that came to us that first Christmas. That's Joy.

Larry Ray, husband to one, father of four, grandfather of seven, and saved by grace Christian. I am also working hard to be the crotchety old man who chases you off of his grass. Merry Christmas.

December 17

Pure Joy

Linda Hicks

Joy can sneak attack, in a passing thought, a whispered prayer for someone you love—even on the baddest of bad days. When that happens, let it in. It's a gift from the Creator given in the nick of time.



In the past four or so years, a frequent-flyer source of joy has been our two grandsons. Nathan is our bonus grandson, given to us when Caroline met and married our son-in-law, Travis—an astonishing young man, loving, intelligent with eclectic interests and possessing a true gift for fatherhood. He often reminds me of my own dad, though mine never had to do a stint as a single father.

Nathan was seven years old when we met, somewhat shy yet willing to engage with these two “unknowns” and soon after, our extended family. Quite an extraordinary capability at a tender age. I cherish the memory of that sweet embrace given voluntarily at the end of our first meeting. At thirteen, we still get them, even if we initiate more often. We don't see him nearly as often as we would like, due to a joint custody agreement and his spending half the week and every other weekend with his mother—a fortunate and amicable arrangement which allows us to be part of his life as well. He is a good student at Thoreau Middle School in Tulsa, and actually enjoys math and science. This time of year, on weekends his father isn't working, these rugged outdoorsmen have hunted together since Nathan was five, a bond that strengthens them as

father and son and is a source of pride when they bring home venison or duck to enjoy in the months to come. Nathan already has three deer to his credit, along with duck and wild turkey! He is pure joy in our lives.

Caleb, who turns three just before Christmas, comes at our hearts from a completely different direction. Having known him from just two hours old (we didn't meet Caroline until 100 days after her birth), we've been able to experience early infancy in a way we weren't with our own daughter. Caroline experiences it differently as well. She recently expressed her feelings on that in a way that somewhat surprised me. She has always wanted to be a mother, but she recently expressed her feelings on that in a way that somewhat surprised me. She has wanted a "blood-relative, someone who looks like me." Having always felt toward her as a "blood-relative," I often forget we are not. Her comment offered great insight into her mind and soul. Several years ago when she was teaching English in Seoul, she was (with enormous effort on her part) able to arrange a brief meeting with her birth mother, entailing a long train trip from northwestern to southeastern South Korea with a social worker/interpreter. Caroline wanted to thank her birth mother for choosing adoption from a situation that would have been far less than ideal in the traditions/perspectives of single parenthood in Korea. And to tell her that she understood. It will be the only meeting the two will ever have, and she will likely never meet her three half-siblings who do not know she exists. So a "blood-relative" is an important bond.

As for Caleb, he is the happiest, funniest child I've ever known--after his mother. His parents do not always feel this way, but of course, they are wrong. He is happy and funny even when he is full-frontal and demonstrating that he can pee standing up--into the closet. He loves dinosaurs and knows the correct Latin names of ALL of them. He's crazy about "big helpers" and can name every piece of macho big machinery he sees. His papa is his favorite toy and their bond is a consummation of pure joy. Nana is content in second-place (she is more likely to be the occasional disciplinarian while Papa is the master of distraction). Both understand that we do what he wants and nobody gets hurt. I do get my moments, though. In a not-quite-often-enough snuggle watching "Bluey" cartoons, I heard myself spontaneously whisper, "I love this boy!" He whispered back, "I love this Nana." Pure joy. In the nick of time.

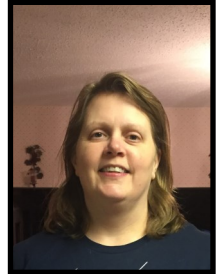
Linda is a retired executive assistant whose guilty pleasure is watching "Glow Up" and dark detective stories on Netflix with her husband, Alan, who is incomparable in every good way possible.

December 18

The Hands & Feet of Christ

Sheri Cook

Volunteering over the years at both Good Shepherd Medical Clinic and CareForOKC has allowed me to interact with a lot of people less fortunate than myself. It is such a joy to watch a new family come to get clothes and food and see their eyes light up when they learn that they get to pick out their food, which is something I take for granted. Most food banks have the foods already bagged and just hand it out, but at Care4OKC, they have been able to make it individualized so that people with special diets can pick out things they can actually eat. This is what we are called to do: Show Christ's love and put others above ourselves. So when you give foods or other resources to Care4OKC, you are bringing joy to those less fortunate.



Sheri Cook has been a volunteer at Good Shepherd and Care for OK since 2000. She and her husband, Jarrett, have raised their children: Kenneth "KJ" and Libby here at FBC OKC.

December 19

Sudden Moments

Doris Lang

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

Life is full of sudden moments that can forever change our lives. These moments can be full of surprise, delight, joy and healing but they can also



cause brokenness, anguish, despair and fear.

The shepherds experienced fear but peace settled in them. It's not difficult to experience God's peace in joyful moments. To get encouragement from a friend, to mend a relationship, to be told we are cured of cancer, these are experiences that are celebrated with delight. For some of us it is even hard to see His peace because when things are going well, it can be easier to walk in our own strength.

What about when we get devastating news? The injury of a loved one, the death of a friend or family member, the news that our job has been terminated. No matter what the circumstance, His peace will be there hovering above the pain, fear and anguish. It can be more challenging to find God's peace when the news is difficult, but it can also lead to the realization of our need for more dependence on Him. God cares deeply for us in both circumstances and is always present in the moment.

Father, for all the sudden moments that happen, let us reach out to you knowing that You care and that Your peace is always present in every moment of our lives. Amen.

Doris lives in a condo in Oklahoma City with husband Herb. Our daughter, Jill, and son-in-law, Jay Gregstron, live next door. We moved here about two years ago from Duncan while Herb was in cancer treatment that has resulted in remission. We enjoy making new friends after leaving our son and family plus good friends and our church family in Duncan.

December 20

Our God Who Loves Us

Susan Curtiss

I'll never forget (or live down?) one of my children's most vivid holiday memories. In December of 2007, we took a road trip to Chicago to visit family for the Christmas holiday. Unfortunately, this was the same month as one of the infamous ice storms that knocked out power to a huge part of Oklahoma City (including my home).



It meant, too, that I spent most of that month wrapping up work responsibilities, getting the kids to and from school and “Mother’s Day Out” programs, attending all extra-curricular end-of-semester programs, *and* getting ready for the holidays – while living back and forth between friends’ homes for about a week, until eventually finding a room at a hotel in downtown Oklahoma City.

I remember buying a miniature Christmas tree to try and make things more festive in the hotel room; unfortunately its effectiveness to lift holiday spirits was proportionate to its size. Well, I *tried*.

Thankfully we were able to keep our Holiday “date” with family, so a few days before Christmas we packed up our OKC hotel room and headed north where we eventually reached and stayed with my sister and the rest of our extended family. I was relieved to have made it, but due to the responsibilities *at work*, *to* people, *for* presents, and under a constant pressure to *be present*, etc... and an unwillingness on my part to reassess commitments or re-focus priorities in any part of my life, my stress was compounding. Then, one morning after a couple of days in Chicago, our family (as in: aunts and uncles and a bunch of cousins, about fifteen of us) went outside to load everyone up in the cars for a day together over at the zoo. But when I got close enough to my car...I saw I had a flat tire...*and you know what?*

I LOST IT.

As in, I recall having no *conscious* thought, I just immediately started saying a **very bad word**, repeatedly, and louder and *louder*, all while sobbing uncontrollably. Whether it was from the public display of emotion to the **very bad word**, I *absolutely* freaked out my kids (well, ALL the kids, actually), and stunned my adult family members into silence. Even as bad as it was, I was nonetheless way too upset to even be horrified by what I was doing and saying. My *full* humanity was on *full* display, whether I liked it or not.

For the record, I most certainly *did not*.

But even while I did not *like* it, I wanted to share this story as it was *also* a time in my life when my pretense was so completely obliterated that *humility* had a chance to influence my heart and mind and open them up in new and more authentic ways to experience God’s love. I mean, we know we need Him. But losing that mindset is so easy all the time, maybe (ironically) especially during the Advent season.

Today I hope that you will be encouraged, that when you see *your* humanity is showing, it is *never* a surprise to the God who made you and loves you. It is, instead, an opportunity to humbly turn to God's love which is *wholly responsive* to our imperfection.

This wholeness of God's love makes me think, too, of this verse (it's my absolute favorite): **"The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing." Zeph. 3:17** I love this verse because not only does it *explicitly* tell us many of the ways that God loves us, but it *implicitly* reveals many of our needs *for* Him. The fact is, who I was revealed to be on *that* day, is who I am (who we all are) *every* day: humans in need of our God. God's presence, His saving, His delight in us, His comforting love, and His singing over us – He is these things to us because we need these things from Him. I'd encourage you to re-read that verse now, replacing "you" with your name. It's so powerful, it's everything: Who He is to and for us, each one of us. *Our imperfections, while certainly not to be exalted, blessedly serve by His grace as reminders of our humanity, and God's loving invitation into relationship with and in Him.*

Susan is an attorney here in Oklahoma City. She and her husband David started coming to FBCOKC in February 2020, and continued attending virtually through the pandemic. She and David came back to in-person worship this past summer, which means that most of their attendance to date, has still been from their sofa at home! Susan and David went to and graduated from the same college, but re-connected about ten years ago when David's work brought him from Washington D.C. to Oklahoma. They married two years later. Together they have three adult children (one of them is married, but no grandkids yet!). Something you may not know about Susan is that she grew up in a military family, most of her childhood was living in the Lawton and Ft. Sill area, but she attended and graduated High School in the Republic of Panamá.

December 21

Boundless Love

Brad Stewart

CS Lewis says this in his book, *The Problem of Pain*:

But God wills our good, and our good is to love Him (with that responsive love proper to creatures) and to love Him we must know Him: and if we know Him, we shall in fact fall on our faces. If we do not, that only shows that what we are trying to love is not yet God—though it may be the nearest approximation to God which our thought and fantasy can attain. Yet the call is not only to prostration and awe; it is to a reflection of the Divine life, a creaturely participation in the Divine attributes which is far beyond our present desires. We are bidden to ‘put on Christ’, to become like God. That is, whether we like it or not, God intends to give us what we need, not what we now think we want. Once more, we are embarrassed by the intolerable compliment, by too much love, not too little” (chapter 3)

As Lewis notes, our good is to love God. That’s what we were created to do. We love God by knowing Him, and if we know Him, “we shall in fact fall on our faces.” When we come to a true knowledge of who God is and how much He loves us, it should cause us to bow before Him in humility and reverence. Not in a spirit of fear, but with a heart of deep gratitude for His grace. If “God intends to give us what we need, not what we now think we want”, what is it you’re needing right now? If we ever begin to doubt God’s infinite love for us, remember that God traveled the distance from heaven to Earth to display His true affections for us.

December 22

No Beginning, No Ending

Tanya Speer

Down by the creekbank by the old holler log. And now many of you are singing (maybe even recalling those choreography moves that took forever to get just right!) And for those who may not have been in choir way back in the 1900's (circa 1979 to be exact), my church performed the Down By the Creekbank musical, and I was selected to sing a solo about love. The song started...Love is a very special thing...a smile, a tear, a soft summer rain. It has no beginning, it has no end, but I like it best when it's shared with a friend.



When this song came to mind recently, I never put much thought into the lyrics, specifically "It has no beginning, it has no end." What does this look like? Love with no beginning starts before we could imagine. Love without ending never fades, it's unconditional. Can I love like this? I want to, but I find my idea of love is tainted with my humanness – my reaction to circumstances beyond my control, my dealings with difficult people or the hurt incited by a family member. What this shows me is my worldly love can be conditional. As long as everything is going my way, it's easy to love. But love is tested when we are faced with the challenges from the world.

However, God loves unconditionally. God will never love us more than he does today. His love is infinite and beyond my little human brain to grasp. This means we cannot DO anything to produce more love from God. This means we cannot DO anything to take away love from God. God loves us so much, he sent his son as Savior to restore our broken relationship with Him after the original sin.

1 John says "God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him." When we accept Jesus as Savior he not only washes away our sins, but we abide in God and become one in whom Christ dwells. When Christ dwells in us, we are blessed with the fruit of the

Spirit. The first fruit mentioned from Galatians 5:22 is love, I think this is intentional. God's love has no beginning – he loved us before we were in the womb. God's love has no end – he loves us into eternity.

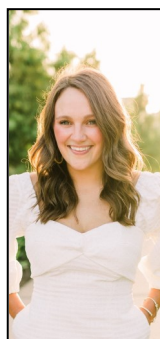
Tanya is a wife to Michael and mom to Parker and Hayden. She was born and raised in Greenwood, Mississippi and graduated from Mississippi State University with a marketing degree. Tanya is owner and baker for Sweetioli a home-based bakery she founded in 2018. When she's not baking cakes or decorating cookies, one of her joys is singing with Canterbury Voices of which she's been a member since 2013. Many of you may not know that Tanya sang at the White House for Christmas in 2005 when she was 8 months pregnant with her daughter Parker. This was definitely one the highlights of her musical adventures.

December 23

A Love Like No Other

Makenna Bray

What is love? Why do we need to love? Every morning when I wake up there is one main thing I pray about and that is to love others like God loves us. The love from God is like no other. It is so easy to be blinded by the hate and negativity of this world. We walk by so many people in a day and never know what someone is going through. We see homeless people on the road and don't think twice about how they got there. We are quick to judge others when they are not like us. There is one thing people need and that is to feel loved.



When we seek God and read in the bible the stories on how he has changed people's lives, it leaves you with the feeling of wanting to be compassionate. It makes you want to change your ways and be more attentive to people who need more light in their dark tunnel. God picked each of us to live in this world. He wants us to talk about Him and spend time praying. The ways I have learned to love from God has changed how I love others and myself. God's love changes us for the good.

Here are some simple ways to show others God's love: Always be kind, forgive and forget, and help someone around you that could be struggling (even if its just a smile). 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 says it best.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. ⁸Love never fails.

Makenna Bray is new to the church family and has never felt more at home. She and her husband Colin started coming to FBC in April of 2021. She is from Houston, TX and graduated from the University of Oklahoma in 2020. An interesting fact about Makenna is that she studied abroad in South Africa for a month while at OU and looks forward to many adventures ahead with her husband.

December 24

A Sky Full of Children

Madeleine L'Engle (Author)

I walk out onto the deck of my cottage, looking up at the great river of the Milky Way flowing across the sky. A silver moon hangs in the southwest, with the evening star gently in the curve.

Evening. Evening of this day. Evening of my own life.

I look at the stars and wonder. How old is the universe? All kinds of estimates have been made and, as far as we can tell, not one is accurate. All we know is that once upon a time, or rather, once before time, Christ called everything into being in a great breadth of creativity—waters, land, green growing things, birds and beasts, and finally human creatures— the beginning, the genesis, not in ordinary Earth days; the Bible makes it quite clear that God's time is different

from our time. A thousand years for us is no more than a blink of an eye to God. But in God's good time the universe came into being, opening up from a tiny flower of nothingness to great clouds of hydrogen gas to swirling galaxies. In God's good time solar systems and planets and ultimately this planet on which I stand on this autumn evening as the Earth makes its graceful dance around the sun. It takes one Earth day, one Earth night, to make a full turn, part of the intricate pattern of the universe. And God called it good, very good.

A sky full of God's children! Each galaxy, each star, each living creature, every particle and subatomic particle of creation, we are all children of the Maker. From a subatomic particle with a life span of a few seconds, to us human creatures somewhere in the middle in size and age, we are made in God's image, male and female, and we are, as Christ promised us, God's children by adoption and grace.

Children of God, made in God's image. How? Genesis gives no explanations, but we do know instinctively that it is not a physical image. God's explanation is to send Jesus, the incarnate One, God enfleshed. Don't try to explain the Incarnation to me! It is further from being explainable than the furthest star in the furthest galaxy. It is love, God's limitless love enfleshing that love into the form of a human being. Jesus, the Christ, fully human and fully divine.

Was there a moment, known only to God, when all the stars held their breath, when the galaxies paused in their dance for a fraction of a second, and the Word, who had called it all into being, went with all his love into the womb of a young girl, and the universe started to breathe again, and the ancient harmonies resumed their song, and the angels clapped their hands for joy?

Power. Greater power than we can imagine, abandoned, as the Word knew the powerlessness of the unborn child, still unformed, taking up almost no space in the great ocean of amniotic fluid, unseeing, unhearing, unknowing. Slowly growing, as any human embryo grows, arms and legs and a head, eyes, mouth, nose, slowly swimming into life until the ocean in the womb is no longer large enough, and it is time for birth.

*We wish you a
Merry Christmas
and a
Happy New Year!*

