



Advent

Line

by

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Advent Meditations 2017

Advent 2017...

The words 'haste' and 'ponder' are both part of the Christmas story. After the angelic announcement of Jesus' birth, the shepherds traveled in 'haste' to find the holy family. After the shepherds departed, Mary 'pondered' the event in the quiet stillness of her heart. Haste and pondering are both part of the Christmas experience.

If our lives were somehow measured, most of us probably spend a little more time in haste during the Christmas season compared to pondering. It's not sugarplums dancing in our heads, but rather parties, shopping lists, church events, school events, family demands, decorating, Christmas cards, and... well, you are familiar with the array of merriment.

In this season typically defined by haste, we invite you to pause each day and ponder. Slow down – not just in your living but in your reading of the Christmas story. The story is so familiar, we scoot through it and skirt around it in haste. This year, your church staff has written a devotional guide that ponders the Christmas story line by line. We hope it brings some stillness, comfort and peace to an otherwise busy season.

Included in these pages is a listing of Advent and Christmas worship services and programs that provide opportunities for your participation in the season's festivities. These may add to the 'haste' of your season. The readings can be used for your private devotional time or as a way for your entire family to slow down and 'ponder' the Christmas story. To make it a family time, let your children take turns lighting the Advent candle(s) and blowing them out. Discuss the symbolism of the Light coming into the world. Let them read the line of the Christmas story.

An Advent wreath is easy to improvise. Place four candles in a circle and another in the center of the circle. Normally, three purple (or blue) candles, one pink candle and a center white candle are used. The first week of Advent (Hope), light one of the purple candles. On the second week (Peace), add another purple candle. On the third week (Joy), add the pink candle. On the fourth Sunday (Love), add the remaining purple candle. Christmas, add the center white candle. (Note: The specific colored candles are not required. Some homes use all red with a white center Christ Candle.)

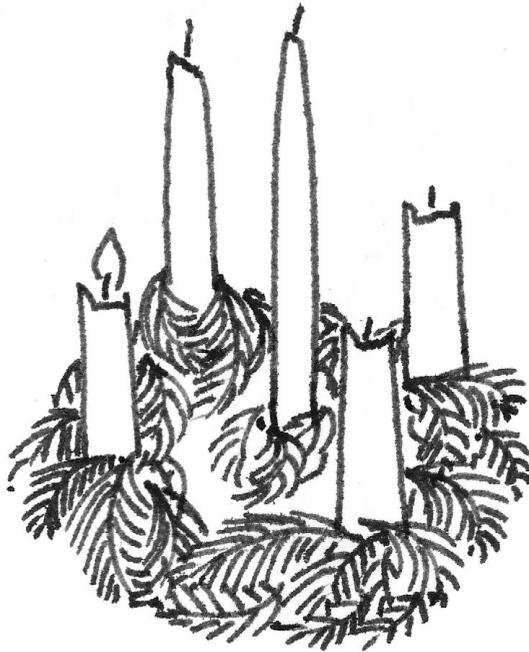
However you choose to use this booklet of devotions, let the simplicity of the Christmas story read line by line give you time to 'ponder' amid the 'haste' of the season.

– Jim and Kimberly

Advent and Christmas Worship and Programs

- December 1, 10:30am.....First Friday Lunch and More
- December 1, 7:30pm.....Chicora Voices Christmas Concert (ticketed event in Sanctuary)
- December 2, 10:00am-12:30pm.....SEE: Praying with Mary (Parlor)
- December 3, 9:30am.....Joint Sunday School for Advent (Fellowship Hall)
- December 3, 10:30am.....First Sunday of Advent, Hanging of the Green Service
Jim Dant – Proclaimer
- December 3, 11:30am-2:00pm.....Children’s Ministry Event: Carols and Cocoa
- December 3, 4:00pm.....Preschool Ministry Event: Ornament Decorating
- December 5, 7:30pm.....SC Governor’s School for the Arts and Humanities Sinfonia Concert
(Sanctuary)
- December 10, 9:30am.....Joint Sunday School for Advent (Fellowship Hall)
- December 10, 10:30am.....Second Sunday of Advent, Jim Dant – Proclaimer
Willcocks’ *Magnificat* with Sanctuary Choir, Organ, Brass and Percussion
- December 10, 6:00pm.....Children’s Choir Christmas Program (Sanctuary)
with Churchwide Christmas Fellowship (Fellowship Hall)
- December 13, 5:00pm & 6:00pm.....First on Main (NOMA Square)
- December 15, 6:30pm.....Roadrunners to Holiday at Peace
(Peace Center)
- December 17, 9:00-10:15am.....Youth and College Christmas Fellowship Breakfast
and Gift Exchange (AYMC Terrace Level)
- December 17, 9:30am.....Joint Sunday School for Advent (Fellowship Hall)
- December 17, 10:30am.....Third Sunday of Advent, Jim Dant – Proclaimer
Bell Tower Ringers
- December 17, 6:30pm.....Candlelight Service of Lessons and Carols
- December 20, 7:00pm.....Longest Night Service (Carpenter Chapel)
- December 22, 6:00pm.....College Christmas Party (Home of Mary Carol Anderson)
- December 24, 10:30am.....Fourth Sunday of Advent, Jim Dant – proclaimer
(no Sunday School or childcare)
- December 24, 5:00pm.....Christmas Eve Service of Communion
- December 31, 9:15am.....Churchwide Breakfast (Fellowship Hall)
- December 31, 10:30am.....First Sunday after Christmas, Jim Dant – Proclaimer

Hope



December 3, 2017

And there were in the same country...

They are epic words. They are familiar words. We've heard them from the mouth of Linus (Charles Schultz's blanket carrying character in the Peanuts cartoon strip) as he explains the meaning of Christmas to Charlie Brown. They've been chanted by a multitude of elementary school students in annual nativity pageants. Most ministers have memorized these words; we preach them every Christmas. (And they always sound best in King James Version.) They are those epic words that shift our attention to shepherd and pastures and sheep and a manger. They shift us, but from what?

Well, just verses before, Luke has been dropping names. This chapter begins like a who's who of the ancient world. Caesar Augustus makes the list, as does Cyrenius, the governor of Syria. The Holy Family makes the list. While in context they may be a couple of financially stressed newlyweds dealing with an unplanned pregnancy, I still can't help but see the artistic halos over their heads. They are the chosen parents of Messiah. David is also mentioned. This celebrated king of Israel is centuries deceased, but his legacy lives on. After all of this – after all of these people – Luke says, “And there were in the same country...”

It has been said, our most private struggles are our most common struggles. It matters not our financial, social, educational, spiritual, physical or political status in life, there are some things we all share. There is a space we all inhabit. When it comes to the struggles, fears, worries, joys, hopes and challenges of life, we are all in the same country.

What better place to begin this Advent/Christmas season than with the acknowledgment we are all in the same country. At our core, we are all yearning to be loved, to love well, to be accepted, to enjoy and make the most of the one life we've been given, and to make a difference in our world. So open this book daily. Open your eyes and see those around you – in our congregation and in our community – that are living in the same country. Open your heart to the hope, peace, joy and love the Advent/Christmas season offers.

Loving God, may we be neighbors, friends and family as we journey through this season – through this common country – together. Amen.

Jim Dant is the senior minister of First Baptist Greenville. He is the father of three grown daughters and the grandfather of one granddaughter, Harper Rose.

December 4, 2017

...shepherds abiding in the field,...

Abide (verb): obey, observe, follow

In this time, shepherds were considered lowly, unclean, plain men. They were not favored by most and were looked down upon; however, God continuously used shepherds to represent those who care for God's people. These humble shepherds were chosen to receive the angels' message of good news of Jesus' birth. God passed over upright, noble, wealthy people to be his witnesses. Instead, he chose shepherds to receive and share Good News. The angels' message is for all people – not just the honorable and worthy.

How fitting is it that the birth of Christ be announced to shepherds simply doing their job! If you think about it, abiding is essential for shepherding. Years later, Jesus would stress the importance of his sheep (us) abiding in him according to John's gospel. In "abiding" they had to stay awake. Had they been asleep and not tending their sheep, they wouldn't have received the good news, known its truth and been able to spread the word.

God uses all people, including regular, everyday flawed people, like you and me, to minister to the world. So wherever your field is, abide fully and trust that God can use you for miraculous – even simple things like tending sheep.

*Lord, as I go through the motions of day to day busy-ness, remind me of the shepherds and the example they set. Help me to abide in you and your word. Continue to show me that you can use all people, including myself, for your glory. Allow me the opportunity to share the good news. Help me to be an example of abiding in your word.
Amen.*

Sarah Carter is a graduate of Winthrop University who grew up in the Greenville area. She is a pastor's kid and has been involved in church activity all her life. She has a special place in her heart for youth ministry and loves her role as the Youth Ministry Assistant. Sarah is a music fan, cheese fanatic and coffee lover. In her free time, she loves to be with family and friends.

December 5, 2017

...keeping watch over their flock by night.

The shepherds in this story watched over their sheep just as parents watch over their children. I certainly don't have any experience watching sheep, but I have had lots of opportunities to watch my children enjoy the Advent season.

Many memories come to mind that are probably similar to many other families – visits with Santa, baking cookies, wrapping presents, decorating the tree, the anticipation of gifts on Christmas morning... Here are a couple of my favorites:

As young children do, Sophie and Will always got excited thinking about what they might get for Christmas. When Will was 2 years old and Sophie was 6 years old, I asked them what they hoped Santa would bring them. Will very quickly answered, "A drum set!" After a minute, Sophie replied, "Earplugs!" Will did indeed receive his first (of several) drum set on Christmas morning, and Sophie got a CD Walkman with earphones.

Another favorite "watching my flock" moment happens each year at the Christmas Eve Service that we attend at John's parents' church. They always end this service by lighting candles and singing "Silent Night," just as we do at our Candlelight Service of Lessons and Carols. I watch my children light their candles and see the glow on those precious faces, and it takes my breath away. When they were little, I loved seeing the look of awe and wonderment as they watched the light and sang about Jesus's birth. Now that they are older, I still love seeing their young adult faces staring at the light in wonderment.

One other "flock" I love watching is the flock of children in our church's Children's Choirs. A choir leader's job is not unlike a shepherd – keeping the children (sheep) on task and helping them learn about praising God with music. The Children's Christmas Program is one of my favorite parts of the Advent season. Seeing their excitement and hearing those angelic voices singing to God is truly inspiring, and it enhances my Advent season.

It won't be long before my children and the choir children will be watching over their own flocks, but for now, I am glad they are in mine.

Dear God, thank you for the sheep that are in our own flocks, and thank you for the shepherds among us.

Priscilla Harris is the Children's Choir Coordinator at FBG, directs the Treble Choir (5-year-olds), and sings in the Sanctuary Choir. She is also a community sign language interpreter. Priscilla is married to John Harris, and they have two children, Sophie and Will.

December 6, 2017

And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them,...

Picture it...you're a poor, tired shepherd out in the fields...just minding your own business...hanging out with your sheep...trying your best to keep your flock safe... and... "SHAZAM!" The Angel of the Lord appears.

One of my favorite Christmas books is *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, by Barbara Robinson. I think one of the best scenes involves Gladys Herdman's interpretation of this part of the Christmas story where she yells, "SHAZAM!!!" and imagines the Angel of the Lord being just like her favorite superhero: "Out of the black night with horrible vengeance, the Mighty Marvo—" Yeah, it's a pretty irreverent take on the Angel of the Lord...but hey, the Herdmans weren't reverent kids, yet in the end, they understood the true meaning of the Christmas story better than most.

Then there's one of my favorite recitatives from Handel's *Messiah* where the soprano sings the line "and Lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them..." accompanied by almost frantic violins...building up suspense for the revelation of glory that comes next. This is a much more refined adaptation of the angel appearing to the shepherds. When I'm in a classical Christmas music mood – which is quite often – this portion of *Messiah* always paints the perfect picture of the night when the Angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds.

Of course, my Christmas wouldn't be complete without watching *A Charlie Brown Christmas*...and again, my favorite scene involves the telling of the Christmas narrative: when Linus says "lights please," a spotlight shines on him, and he begins to tell Charlie Brown "what Christmas is all about." Just hearing him say that one word "Lo" gets me every time. That child's voice (you know they used ordinary school children – not child actors – as the voices in the special) captures the reverent wonder of the Christmas story for me – I get choked up every time I watch that scene.

I love all three interpretations of the Angel of the Lord: the bombastic, yet awe-inspiring wonder of Gladys Herdman that makes me laugh out loud; the elegant and refined, yet suspenseful music of Handel that makes me sing for joy; and the simple, yet profound wisdom of Linus that reminds me that often, the greatest gifts come from quiet, humble faith.

God of wonder, God of awe – May we approach this Christmas season open to receive your sometimes irreverent, often refined and seemingly simple yet unmeasurable gifts of hope, joy, peace and love. May we, like the humble shepherds, share your wonder with all those we meet along our way. Amen.

Amy Joye directs Vocare, FBG's music option for youth. She also works at Pecknel Music Company. Amy has a son, Will.

December 7, 2017

...and the glory of the Lord shone round about them;...

Do you see it? When you look around at the world in front of you, do you see it? Do you see what's happening here, at this very moment, right in front of our eyes?

The Universe exists! Matter and Energy are swirling around out there, set into motion. Life is happening! The dust of the Earth somehow comes together to take shape and form in countless varieties, living and breathing, growing, creating, learning and adapting. Photons of light are bouncing around, allowing this whole experience to be – well, experienced.

A literal Universe of possibility has been created. Not only is it happening for every other living thing on the planet, but you were birthed into it and given your own, unique, individual perspective on it all and the freedom to live and interact however you choose. You get to exist. You get to “be.” That’s amazing. It’s glorious.

It doesn't have to be a band of angels to get your attention. Just look around and consider the incredible gift of Life, experience and possibility that was given to you. The glory of God is shining all around you, right now. Glory!

God, thank you, thank you, thank you, for the gift of Life, allowing us to experience you and your glory. Amen.

Bootie Cothran grew up at First Baptist and has been on staff for 13(??) years as the Media and Technology Coordinator. His parents are John and Jeanette Cothran.

December 8, 2017

...and they were sore afraid.

One of my earliest memories is of going to a county fair with my family. For me, as a first-grader, it was a bewildering experience of flashing lights, loud noises and strangely-behaving people. It must have been even more so for my little sister, who couldn't have been more than 3 or 4.

After a long evening, we started back toward the car, and she, who had been carried a lot, was ready to get down and walk for while. We turned our backs on the noise and lights and headed across some railroad tracks toward the parking lot, and we noticed that a train was coming in the distance, slowly but surely. Keri was lagging behind, and when she got to the tracks and noticed the train, she froze.

We began yelling: "Come on, Keri! Train's coming!" She looked at us, looked back at the train, looked at us, looked at the train. There was really no danger. We were close; the train was slow, but having never been in such a situation before, it overwhelmed her. In one of the most illogical displays of human behavior I have ever witnessed, she sat down on the tracks. Dad scooped her up, of course – crisis averted – but the sight of my bewildered sister sitting down on those tracks was an unforgettable lesson in how fear works on us. When we're afraid, we can't tell friend from foe.

For middle eastern shepherds of the first century, confronting dangers just came with the territory. They slept outside with the sheep because at any point the flock— upon whom everything depended— could be attacked by wild predators or rustled away by thieves. It's safe to assume they were not skittish people.

But when the angels appeared— something they had never seen before, something otherworldly— they panicked. The truth is, they lived, like most of us do, simply reacting to experiences. When we live that way, we are quick to give fear control of our choices. For the shepherds, that meant that when the best thing that could ever happen to a shepherd happened, they saw it as a threat.

I know that terrible things happen every day, but those are the exceptions. Most of the time, we live cradled by Providence, offered miraculous gifts on a daily basis. If I live in fear of the former things I am liable to see any change— even "good tidings of great joy"— as a threat to my security. If I live in light of the latter things, I'm likely to realize that my road rage, my conflicts with co-workers, and the regrettable things I say to my loved ones have less to do with any real threat "out there" and more to do with the fear "in here" that I have not yet faced and cannot yet name.

Loving God, the shepherds were sore afraid, and so are we. Help us to do enough self-assessment to realize that, because of our fear, we may not be seeing things as they really are. Teach us to trust your love and your goodness so that we are ready to embrace the opportunities for joy that you daily, faithfully send our way. Amen!

Kyle Matthews is an associate minister at First Baptist Greenville, married to Susan, and father of Emily and Christopher.

December 9, 2017

And the Angel said unto them, fear not...

A normal Saturday morning... discovery... fear... CPR... fear... ER... and the ultimate fear... nothing we could do... fear. The fear, pain and disbelief on that day were devastating. During the grief process following the death of my husband, I, as the shepherds in Luke, experienced fear, but God was always there reassuring me.

Isaiah 41:10 – Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you; I will help you; I will uphold you with my victorious right hand...

Isaiah 41:13 – For, I the Lord your God hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, “Do not fear, I will help you.”

“Do not fear” – the message in Isaiah and the message in Luke blended on that long ago night when the angel of the Lord came upon the shepherds... and said to them, “Fear not.”

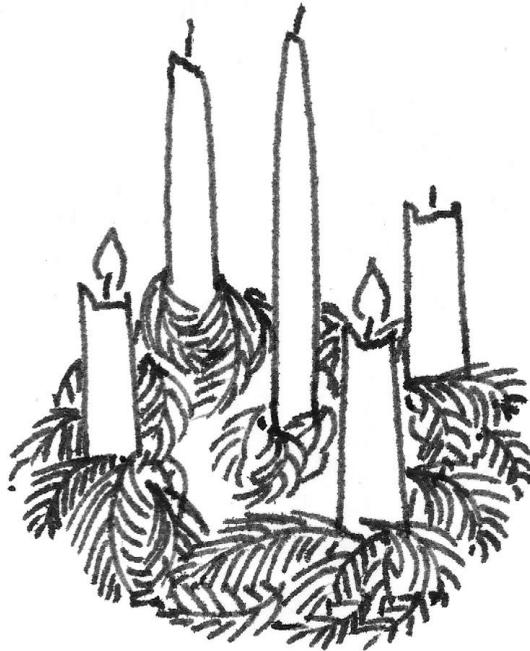
“Do not fear” has become my mantra... do not fear today, do not fear tomorrow, do not fear the future... GOD IS IN CONTROL!!!

Dear God, thank you for walking the valleys of fear with us. Thank you for your grace, your strength and your love, which allow us to conquer all fears, knowing that you are our constant companion on this journey of life – our Omnipotent and Omnipresent God.

In Jesus name... Amen.

Gail T. House has been a member of First Baptist Church since 1998, a member of the financial staff of FBCG in various capacities since 2001, and in her current position, Contribution Services, since 2005. Gail is originally from Ellenboro, North Carolina, but is a “Greenville native” by heart. She has one son, Eric R. Daniel, who lives in Asheville, NC, with his dog Bandit, and she is honorary “G.G.” to two precious children, Mary Joyce and Sanford Hicklin, who along with their parents live in her former home. Outside of work, she enjoys reading, interior decorating, participating in special events at a local clothing boutique and spending time with her son, her “grand dog,” family and friends.

Peace



December 10, 2017

...for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy,...

Right on time, and in the most abrupt way, Christmas comes barreling into our lives. It happens every year. Right about the time we put away our beach towels and sunscreen, we begin to see the red and green ribbon and wreaths hanging in the aisles of the stores. It's expected.

My Pandora account, one of my music-streaming apps, even tried to push me into the familiar sounds of the season way back in September! They were sending emails, reminding me of the variety of Christmas tunes I have loved in the past and expecting I would once again choose them as my preferred music-streaming resource. Some may welcome the early push of the Christmas season with delight and fervor, but I have struggled to hold off listening to my favorite Christmas music until after Thanksgiving. For me, it's part of my preparation for the season of Advent. However, no matter when you choose or concede to the pressures of listening, Christmas comes, ready or not, through sites, sounds and smells.

At times I may struggle with the push towards Christmas, but there are blessings along the way in finding, or rather experiencing, true joy in the season of Advent. The variety of talk show hosts have a harsh, unconvincing way of providing laughter and entertainment to help drown our sorrows for some moments of superficial joy, but faith pushes us in a different direction, a place of true joy.

We all need to hear about "good tidings of great joy," especially in our world today. Amidst our sufferings and the daily reminders of depression, cyclical poverty, and natural disasters, our world and our country need to be prompted, rather pushed, to hear "good tidings of great joy." The angel who announces "good tidings of great joy," invites us to hear the good news, the hope brought to us in the form of a baby. So right on time and in the most abrupt way, a child, God incarnate is born. Despite entering our broken world, in all its messiness, he reveals a new world order and way of living for all people. God reminds us to have hope in the midst of our struggles. Our culture distracts with laughter, while faith pushes us, or rather expects, true joy to firmly resist being lost in life's struggles.

It's expected – Christmas music, that is – every year. It allows me the escape of the everyday and leads me into a season of hope with glimmers of true joy, reminding me of the good news that was brought to us in a simple, yet miraculous way.

God of great joy, break into our lives in a way that is expected – and in an unexpected way. Challenge our expectations and call us to see life differently. Push us to find true joy that prompts us to hear the good tidings of the season. Amen.

Mary Carol Anderson, Minister of Youth and Recreation, is honored, to have returned home to the place that has raised her. She enjoys continuing the tradition of loving, teaching and enabling our youth to have the freedom to discover who they are as children of God. Missions, community involvement and guiding youth to be the hands and feet of Christ in this world are her passions. She loves living in Greenville and spending time in the beautiful surrounding area.

December 11, 2017

...which shall be for all people.

I like to think of myself (rather smugly) as an open and welcoming person. I have never struggled conceiving of a Christianity that welcomes and celebrates people who are gay or transgendered. I have no trouble imagining an afterlife brimming with Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, atheists and everyone in between. This phrase from Luke – “which shall be for all people” – is the perfect phrase for me to impart my wisdom (rather smugly) on anyone less *enlightened* than I. Now I write an Advent meditation about a God whose all-encompassing love and grace extends to everyone – no matter their gender, race, sexual orientation, nationality or even religion. All are welcome in the church... but the truth is, I do not welcome everyone into the church. I want some people to stay away.

You may be reading this during the Advent season, but I am writing this in August during the aftermath of Charlottesville. Today, I am not feeling the Christmas spirit. I am heartbroken and angry, really angry. I am the kind of angry that I can almost touch – my anger is physical, and it’s stubborn. I am angry at white supremacists and those who enable them. I don’t want them anywhere near me, my church or my God. I don’t want homophobes, misogynists, islamophobes or abusers here either. The truth is I do not welcome everyone into the church. I want some people to stay away.

I am constantly reminded that Jesus didn’t come to earth *just* to make us feel good and happy and loved. He came to challenge us. He challenges us to fight for the oppressed and destroy systems of oppression, yes, but Jesus also challenges us to love the oppressor. I have no idea how to do both. It would be much easier if I only had to deal with the hurting and not the hurt-ers. The truth is I do not welcome everyone into the church. I want some people to stay away.

I wish I could offer some poetic words or moving anecdote to illustrate how I’ve learned that those “good tidings of great joy which shall be for all people” really are for all people, but I have none. I’m not very good at loving people who hurt others, and I certainly don’t know how to forgive them, but I do know how to hope. That is what I find every time I reread the nativity story – hope embodied in a small, helpless newborn – not a lighthearted hope but a deep and expansive hope. This hope is just as tangible as my anger. I hope systems of oppression can be dismantled brick by ugly brick. I hope the oppressed and the oppressors can be liberated from those systems. I hope I can change. I hope I can be forgiven, and I hope I can forgive because the truth is, Jesus welcomes everyone into the church. Jesus wants no one to stay away.

Jesus, liberate us from oppression – whether we are the oppressed or the oppressor. We seek to “do justice” without forgetting to “love mercy.” We seek to root out injustice in our world. We hope to forgive those who sustain injustice and to be forgiven when we sustain injustice. We hope to find a way to share good tidings of great joy with all people. Amen.

Jennifer Craig is the Ministry Assistant to the Spiritual Formation, Children and Preschool Ministries. She grew up at First Baptist and is the daughter of Cindy and Michael Craig. She is sister to Jason Craig and Cathleen Taylor. Most importantly, she is Aunt Jen to her three nieces – Anson, Charlotte and Mary Jenness.

December 12, 2017

For unto you is born this day in the city of David...

In 1976 at the old Greenville General Hospital a baby boy was born into a family of two loving parents and a terrific 9 year old sister. 2017 was not even on their radar. The eldest sibling was born in 1967, and a miscarriage of twin girls happened a few years after. No one suspected that at forty years old this husband and wife would give birth to their first and only son. Halfway through their lives and careers, a great surprise came to pass, but this couple was elated nonetheless; a boy, a son, an heir, a namesake.

After a few years, this boy became a handful, an opinionated and strong-willed little person with a big smile and a great personality. He played in the dirt, rode his bicycle down the street, and all the neighbors welcomed him and knew where he belonged. He was blessed beyond measure to grow up in a world where there was kindness and friendship.

As he grew, he was not an exceptional student. He never made the honor roll or spoke a different language. He was not skilled in mathematics or science or history, but he did love music! He drank it in – it just clicked. His family was very involved in church and the music of the church. Soon he began to sing for church and enjoyed serving as pianist and assistant to the choir director. This love, enjoyment and fulfillment made him feel that he had indeed found his place and calling in life.

How did baby Jesus feel in a feeding trough, surrounded by strange animals and the smell of their food and waste so near? Did he know he was out of place and out of his element? Could he have known he was destined for so much more than where he found himself in that moment? I wonder if the infant Jesus we envision in this stinky manger at Christmas knew he was destined for much greater accomplishments.

Have you stopped to consider that you are destined for much greater? You have not completed all your assignments on earth. Your task is not yet done. You have not yet finished your race. Do not give up and do not lose heart. The baby that grew into the Living Son of God is on your side and is by your side sustaining you each day. Our Lord desires to continue to conform you to the image of his Son. We will not remain as a babe in a manger. It is our destiny to become a resurrected and mature heir of God. Be patient and trust that God makes great people from humble beginnings just as he did in the city of David long ago!

*Loving Creator, thank you for not being finished with me yet.
Help me to grow into the child you would have me be. Amen.*

Ryland is a native Greenvillian who studied Church Music and Theory at both Furman and Bob Jones Universities. He and his husband, Jay Addison, are members at FBG. Ryland is the FBG Pastoral Care Assistant to Rev. Kendra Plating and also serves as the pianist at Aldersgate UMC Greenville, SC.

December 13, 2017

...a Savior,...

As a kid growing up on superheroes (and even as I got older) I wanted to be heroic myself in some way. I wasn't quite sure what that would look like or what it meant, but I knew it would involve, or at least result in, people believing in me in some new or different way. As I read and learned the Bible stories and got to know the major figures in the Bible, they quite honestly looked like superheroes to me too, and this began to inform and shape what it meant to be a hero and even how I saw Jesus. He was a hero that everyone looked up to and believed in. Just as Superman would see someone in danger and swoop in and save, Jesus responded to sickness and sin with healing and salvation, too.

As I have grown spiritually and matured theologically, I have expanded the lens through which I see the heroic and salvific work of Jesus to reach outside the familiar tropes of comic book figures. That's a fancy way of saying that I am aware that Jesus is not Superman and that Superman is not Jesus. Although as I type this, trying not to imagine him in blue tights, red briefs and a cape is getting more and more difficult. However, I haven't completely left all of that behind. I recently came across a more modern interpretation of the Man of Steel in a comic book series called All-Star Superman. In one scene, Superman sees a teenage girl in danger on the top of a nearby building. In predictable Superman fashion, he flies in and lands on the ledge, but this time he doesn't scoop her up and carry her to safety. Sensing that she is up there voluntarily, Superman instead looks right at her and says, "You're much stronger than you think you are. Trust me," gives her a hug and...does nothing. I still have room in my inner child to allow pop culture to show me new ways to appreciate our savior. In these two lines, Superman both invites faith and offers it, something that Jesus does throughout the gospels but is too often overlooked. This trust that has been placed in the one in need of saving reminds me of the ministry of Jesus. For all of the healings, miracles, signs and conversions of faith among the people of first century Judea, Jesus was never more heroic than when he believed in them. Jesus is never more precious to me than when I remember that he believes in me.

God, we marvel that Jesus came here not only to save us by inspiring us to belief in him, but that his very life and ministry here on earth, his very reason for being born, is because of the faith you have in us. We thank you for loving us so much that you sent to us your son: a healer, a teacher, a servant, a hero, a savior. Amen.

Matt Rollins, Minister of Spiritual Formation and Outreach, is a Greenville native with a BS in Physics from Furman ('97), MS in Mechanical Engineering from Clemson (2001), and a Masters of Divinity from Gardner Webb (2011) with a soon-to-be Doctorate of Ministry from Gardner-Webb (2019) who worked as a systems analyst for Lockheed Martin before being called into Christian ministry. He has been married to his high school sweetheart, Rolyn, for 24 years, and they have three children, Jack (12), Celie Ann (11) and Lucy (7), along with a cat, Sammy, and a dog, Princess Leia Grace (Gracie). His three favorite things to do have not changed since high school – basketball, reading and crossword puzzles – although serving God through the church and being with his family are the most important things in his life.

December 14, 2017

...which is Christ the Lord.

Oh come, let us adore Him, Oh come, let us adore Him, Oh come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord!

We sing it three times to emphasize our adoration as we gather all of the faithful. Christ the Lord has finally come. The Messiah, the Savior who was promised to us, is here. The Lord, who is worthy of our worship and adoration, is ours.

It has always been a favorite Christmas carol of mine. Now looking back, it's amazing the different circumstances it has been sung in different memories. Sometimes I was singing during a processional or opening hymn to set the tone for worship and sometimes as the culmination of my child's Christmas pageant or program as if to say, "This is the main point. This is the takeaway." It's always a favorite of mine when it's time to go caroling. Whether we are visiting neighbors down the street or church members in the nursing home, the first verse gathers us together. We are the faithful, and at this moment, no matter our differences, we are joining together to worship 'Christ the Lord.' I love the time of year between Thanksgiving and Christmas when radio stations will devote their airwaves to Christmas music. The emotion of a song can bring you to the right place no matter where you are going or from where you are coming. The feeling of worship and adoration of "Oh Come, All Ye Faithful" can quickly remind you of the reason for the season. Are you lonely? Are you stressed and busy? Is everything right with your world? Are you celebrating or anticipating the birth of a child? Are you mourning the death of your family member that died on Christmas Eve? These have all been my story during the Christmas season. No matter where you are or what you are going through, Christ's birthday is coming. It's time to join with the choirs of angels and adore Him – through your tears or through your smiles.

In the last verse we give all glory to Jesus, at the time of the celebration of his birth. The baby, who will grow up to become the Savior who will give himself for our sins, is worthy of our worship from the very beginning. "Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing!" The gospel of John begins, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning." (NIV) Christ was there in the beginning, but now he was in the flesh. What a moment for celebrating!

We thank you, Jesus, for coming as a little baby but being Christ the Lord. We know that we need a Savior and are grateful for the salvation you offer. We proclaim you Lord and are thankful that we can worship you freely. Remind us all year long of your love for us and your willingness to come to Earth and walk among us.

Shanda LaForge is the Ministry Assistant in the Missions, Senior Adult and Neighborhood Partnership departments. She grew up in Calhoun, GA, and moved to Greenville in 2011. Shanda is married to Ryan LaForge, and they have a daughter, Elle, who is in sixth grade, and a son, Jacob, in second grade.

December 15, 2017

And this shall be a sign unto you;...

By this time in December, there are signs of the Advent Season all around us. The church is beautifully decorated, and we are reminded of peace, hope, joy and love. When our children were growing up, our favorite family tradition was attending the Candlelight Service of Lessons and Carols. We always arrived early, so we could secure a special seat. My mother was always a part of this. This year, as was the case the past several years, mother wasn't with us. The things we experienced together as a family we still experience, but in a different way now. The signs of my mother's love are still all around us. When the choir sings John Rutter's "Candlelight Carol" I can sense her presence. That was one of her favorite songs.

Many years ago the angel said to the shepherds, "And this shall be a sign unto you." How would this amazing story of the birth of Jesus have unfolded if the shepherds had not been present in the moment to really hear the angel? We're all busy with our families and jobs. It is important for us to slow down and not miss a sign from God and embrace the true meaning of Christmas.

God is with us every day at work and play. Hopefully, we reflect this unconditional love with the people we interact with. As we look at the signs of this holy season, what would God have us to do and learn new this year?

Dear God, I am thankful for every day and for the hope of tomorrow. Please help us to slow down and be aware of the signs of your constant love in our lives as we live out our days in this amazing journey called life. Amen.

Peggy Paul is married to Jimmy Paul, and they have been members of First Baptist since 1988. They have 2 adult married children and 2 wonderful grandchildren, Walker (age 4) and Kate (21½ months). Walker and Kate along with their parents, Amy and Ross Carr, live in Mt. Pleasant. Wes and his wife, Elizabeth, live in Greenville. One of Peggy's favorite things to do is spend time with her family, especially her grandchildren. Peggy is in the Finance Office and works in the area of Office and Personnel Services. She began working here in November 1983.

December 16, 2017

...you shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes...

December 2014 is an Advent season I will always remember. One week before Thanksgiving, Doug and I learned we would become first-time parents to a newborn through adoption, and the next six weeks were a flurry of preparation. The week before and during Christmas, we were waiting for THE phone call at any moment, not leaving home without our hospital bags in the car. Since we were trying to keep the birth a secret, we waited a long time before installing an infant car seat so as not to raise suspicion... when we finally decided to install it and mark that important task off the to-do list, we had a cover story prepared just in case someone questioned our need for a car seat. Every church, family and social event we attended that season, we kept our cell phones close at hand... and tried to appear calm and “normal.” Sitting in the Sanctuary and seeing the Advent banners of Love, Hope, Peace and Joy, I experienced each of those emotions in a new way as I pictured meeting our newborn at any moment.

The words of the angel to the shepherds, “Fear not... I bring tidings of great joy” remind me of the angels sent our way as we prepared to grow our family. When we were distracted by fear and anxiety, God sent angels with a hug, a conversation or a story just when we needed it, reminding us of the joy to come our way.

“And suddenly you know: It’s time to start something new and trust the magic of beginnings.” – Meister Eckhart (*Thank you FBDS Bird Class teachers for sharing this wonderful quote!*)

Christmas came and went with no baby, so we packed up our Christmas decorations and enjoyed a few days of relaxing, still keeping the phone close at hand. Finally, on December 31, our sweet Shelley was born! When we brought her home on January 1, we knew 2015 would be a year of many new beginnings.

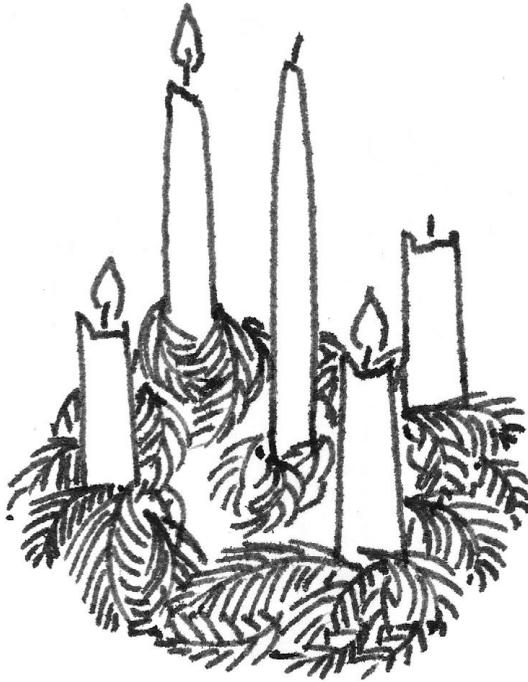
A swaddled baby looks so serene and peaceful, but chances are it was a struggle getting the baby swaddled. What did Mary and Joseph do without Labor and Delivery nurses and YouTube videos to teach them to swaddle? Once the baby is swaddled, they may be peaceful for a little while... until they need to have a diaper change or eat or spit up. But while they are swaddled and peaceful, there is time to study them and imagine what direction their life will take. Did Mary and Joseph have any idea what path Jesus would take? As Doug and I delighted in our gift of a baby girl, the words of a hymn kept running through my mind:

*For the wonders that astound us, for the truths that still confound us,
most of all that love has found us, thanks be to God. (For the Fruit of All Creation)*

*God of Hope, Joy, Love, and Peace, be with us in the anticipation of new beginnings.
Thank you for your love and mystery and help us keep trusting in the wonder. Amen.*

Laura Stout was raised at First Baptist Greenville and has served on staff as Missions Coordinator since 2004. She is married to Doug, and they have one daughter, Shelley.

Joy



December 17, 2017

...lying in a manger.

It might have been sunny and warm in Israel that April morning as we toured Tel Meggido, the remains of an ancient city also known by its Greek name, Armageddon, but what I saw in the ruins of the stable sent me leaping through the calendar pages, straight to Christmas Eve. I could almost smell the piney garlands and feel the warmth of the fireplace. It was a manger.

It didn't look like a manger to me. Weren't mangers in Israel like the mangers I remembered from my granddaddy's barn in eastern Kentucky, wooden troughs full of hay for the cows and horses? This box was carved out of stone. "Look around you," Jim Dant had said. "See any trees?" Of course the manger was made from stone, as trees were a rare commodity there. Just to make sure tourists knew what they were looking at, the folks at this World Heritage Site had placed a wrought iron silhouette of a horse next to it, its ribbon of muzzle reaching into the manger for a mouthful of invisible hay.

A manger! Just the kind they must have had nearby in a stable in Bethlehem! I knew what I had to do. I fished Traveling Baby Jesus out of the zippered pocket of my purse and laid him in the manger. What, don't you carry a four-inch stone baby Jesus around as a traveling companion? How else would he get his own Instagram account? How else would he challenge me to find signs of Jesus wherever I go? Anyway, I put him in the manger and took a picture. The extra-large manger swallowed him up, as if he were laying in a great rock quarry, alone, swaddled, waiting for someone to notice.

We moved on from the stables, and as we examined the great temple and the grain pit, the bronze age shrines and city gates, I kept thinking about the manger. "She wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger..." What a simple image, the son of God placed in a food trough, given to all people. It was as if God, through Mary as she placed him there, was sending us a message, "Here you are, my dears, my own Son, to feed your souls. Take and eat. Take him into every crevice of your heart, to the tips of your fingers and toes, to every cell in your brain. Let his love pulse with the blood in your veins, nourishing the hungriest part of your souls as he shows you how to live in this world of mine – food for your spirit, food for your life."

That's Christmas dinner, right in the April sunshine.

*Dear God, as we get ready to celebrate the gift of your son, help us draw near to the manger. Make us hungry, Lord, for the closeness to you that he brings into our world.
We love you, God. Amen.*

Becky Ramsey has no doubt that as Minister to Children, she has the best job at First Baptist. When she's not at church or searching out places to take photos of Traveling Baby Jesus, she writes about faith and family in books and at her blog at www.beckynamsey.com. Becky is married to Todd Ramsey, and they have four grown children, counting her son-in-law. Her favorite new title, however, is Grandma to Baby Josiah.

December 18, 2017

And suddenly, there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God,...

Angels singing in the heavens is an incredible image to imagine. Sometimes when the choir is working on specific dynamics or effects in Advent or Christmas music, I will say “Imagine you are singing in the heavens as the angels did when Christ was born. You are not singing in a church yet; you are sort of high in the sky over near Highway 291 somewhere...”

I have never forgotten some words my father spoke in a sermon one time: In the Christmas story, when the angels in heaven joyously sang, “Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth,” they didn’t sing in a court or a palace or city hall. They didn’t even sing in a temple or church. The jubilant song the angels sang was heard by shepherds out working in a field – just ordinary people, taking care of animals outside somewhere.

When you hear the beautiful music of this season in our worship services, I hope it fills you with the joy and wonder the shepherds must have had on that first Christmas. I hope you will sing more than usual this season, not only the hymns and carols we sing in church, but sing in your regular, ordinary life. Sing in the car, sing in the house, sing to your children, sing songs of prayer and blessing to God, with thankful hearts for the gift of Jesus Christ who is with us always.

*Be near me Lord Jesus, I ask thee to stay close by me forever and love me, I pray.
Bless all the dear children in thy tender care, and fit us for heaven to live with thee there.
(Gabriel’s Vineyard Songs, 1892)*

Vivian Hamilton serves as our Minister of Music and Worship. Her husband, David, daughters, Sarah and Caroline, and parents, Bill and Mary Ruth Lacy, are all members of our congregation.

December 19, 2017

...and saying, glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace,...

I don't think I know of anyone that does not love everything about a church or school Christmas pageant. I loved being in them when I was a little boy at Turkey Creek Baptist Church. I always wanted to put on my bath robe, put a towel on my head, get a long stick and become a shepherd. Being a shepherd in a Christmas Pageant was pretty safe. Shepherds didn't have to do very much. They had to act afraid (no problem for me), then act surprised and say, "Let us go and see this thing which has come to pass that the angels have told us about." Then they move around the stage and always end up standing by the manger with Mary and Joseph. I have loved watching them in all the churches I have attended. I love the animals, the wise men, the angels, the shepherds (of course), Mary and Joseph, and I love the manger. I have made a few of those in my lifetime. But today's devotional is built around much more than can ever be captured in a Christmas pageant, for today's phrase contains some of the most powerful and uplifting words in the entire Bible and are directed both toward God and toward God's creation, you and me.

"And saying, glory to God in the highest" is an account of the birth of our Lord Jesus the Christ, and the last part of the phrase are the words spoken by the angels of heaven to the frightened shepherds.

The announcement of the birth of the Christ child, the birth of God's Son is the good news that is being announced by the angels to the shepherds. The angels in heaven are praising and glorifying God. Praise is going up to God in the highest heavens because God's child is born. God is being praised because the promised Messiah has come to earth, and the scripture is being fulfilled. Don't miss what else is going on in this phrase, "and on earth Peace," for with the birth of the Christ child, we receive peace. That Peace is another gift of Christmas, and this Peace spreads everywhere this child is received. Glory and praise to God in the highest and from God to us Peace through the baby born in a manger. I look forward to seeing that manger once again in this year's Christmas pageant. May it remind us that as we glorify God, we also receive the Peace given to us as we encounter the baby in a manger, God's only son.

O God, as we see this year's Christmas plays, may we be more thankful than ever for the peace that comes to us through the baby born to us in a manger. Amen.

Frank A. Smith has been on staff at First Baptist for 20 years after serving other churches in North and South Carolina including Myrtle Beach and Charleston. Frank and his wife, Gwen, have two daughters, Tess and Chesnee, who live here and are members of First Baptist. He has 3 grandchildren that he likes to talk about. His present work at First Baptist is with Neighborhood Partnership Missions and Senior Adults. He grew up in Brevard, NC, and attended North Greenville College, Campbell University and Southeastern Seminary.

December 20, 2017

...good will toward mankind.

When my husband and I moved from Ohio to Greenville many, many years ago, we knew no one here. In fact, embarrassingly, I had never heard of Greenville until my husband had an interview with Michelin. I was a bit anxious moving to South Carolina – not sure if the culture and customs in Greenville were significantly different than where I grew up. After all, Greenville was a much smaller town than where I had lived, and it was “the South.” I’d been to Florida for vacation several times, but most Ohioans don’t consider the coasts of Florida to be “Southern” – particularly since so many northerners have relocated to Florida!

George and I had just gotten married the month before, so we were experiencing a lot of firsts on many fronts. Our first Sunday in Greenville happened to be Father’s Day and my birthday. We found the one Greek Orthodox church in town (where we came from, there were 4). Gosh, it was tiny! We attended the liturgy, and everything felt very different. Even though liturgies in each church are supposed to be the same, it didn’t feel like home. After the liturgy, an older couple approached us and introduced themselves. (Of course, I’m probably older now than they were at the time.) They had heard from friends of friends that a young married couple was moving to Greenville from Ohio. Right on the spot, they invited us to their home for lunch. They weren’t planning on company, but they were willing to share whatever they had.

It was a wonderful lunch with their family. When they learned it was my birthday, they stuck some candles in the dessert and sang “Happy Birthday” to me. Sharing their family meal with us meant much more than just feeding us. Call it Southern hospitality, Greek hospitality or good will, it warms your heart and soul. It makes you want to pass it along to others so that they feel the same way.

Lord, help us find a way, no matter how small or large a gesture, to spread good will to loved ones and strangers alike during this Christmas season. Amen.

Stacey Shinas is the Ministry Assistant for Financial Services. She and her husband, George, have two teenage children, Nicholas and Sophia. They enjoy traveling and have been blessed to benefit from the good will of others both at home and during their travels.

December 21, 2017

And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, let us go even now unto Bethlehem and see this thing which has come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.

I have to admit that I was not so thrilled to find a writing assignment in my Inbox. That the writing assignment was for the church's Advent Devotional Guide AND that the writing assignment was developed by the person with whom I share an office made me that much less thrilled! I would much prefer to stay behind the scenes, thank you!

Since I also like to be a team player I set to writing. The verse assigned to me talks about angels (although there were gone) and about shepherds. The very first thing that came to mind after reading my verse was the nativity set that lives in my office. This nativity set was made by my youngest child in June 2015 as a part of that year's Preschool Art Experience. This nativity set has not been outside of my office since it first arrived!

As most nativity sets do, this one reminds me of the Christmas story. It illustrates what I imagine to be the combination of scenes at the inn in the hours and days that follow Jesus' birth. More importantly, this nativity set reminds me of the innocence and the imperfection of my children...and all of God's children. The angel's halo is askew. One of the wise men has a head wrap that magically floats to the right of his head. That poor cow has a tail that is quite contorted!

Some will say that I love these imperfections because it was handcrafted by one of my own kids. Sure, that plays a part in it. More than that, though, it reminds me that the perfect picture doesn't matter. I don't think Mary delighted in having animals hanging out with her and her newborn son, but they got through it. As a busy family with two working parents, our house is not always in "show ready" condition. I've learned to get past it. My youngest child sometimes dresses herself in the wildest of combinations. As long as it is not Sunday morning, I've learned to embrace her sense of self. My oldest would prefer not to dry her hair after her shower. I've learned to leave it up to her.

None of God's children is perfect. I'm happy to be in a church that accepts and embraces our imperfection and our differences. I'm happy my children are growing up in a church that helps them understand their own imperfections as well as the imperfections of others and how to be gracious about it all.

Thank you, Lord, for the imperfect world in which we live. Amen.

Jenna Manning is the Church Operations Coordinator, and her office space leads to Jim's office. Jenna grew up at FBG and has been a full-time employee here for 10 years. She is married to Ken. They have two daughters – 12-year-old Jordan and 8-year-old Kylie – and a dog named Southie. Go Tigers!

December 22, 2017

And they came with haste...

When I first read this verse, the only word I could see was haste. It immediately conjured up all of the hustle and bustle surrounding Christmas. I love Christmas. I love decorating the house, buying gifts, wrapping gifts, going to parties and being with family and friends. Now that I have grandchildren and little ones, there's magic again and a renewed excitement with Christmas.

Then I read the verse again, slowly this time. "And they came with haste." The shepherds hurried to see baby Jesus. They didn't hurry to the mall to grab that perfect present for him. They didn't have to go shopping for the perfect outfit to wear to meet him. The only thing that was on their mind as soon as they heard the news was getting to Bethlehem to meet Jesus as quickly as they could.

That really struck a chord with me. Too often I'm stressed and obsessed over my to-do lists. I lose sight of Christmas spirit being joy in Christ rather than just a temporary, satisfying joy. This Christmas and those that follow, I am going to strive to have the eagerness the shepherds had and have plenty of room for the joy that Christ's birth brings. I'm confident that Christmas will be even that much better when I do.

God, please help me to remember that Christmas is not about rushing around from store to store or party to party. Help me remember that it is a time, as it always is, to come to you with haste. Amen.

Mittie has been a member of First Baptist for 30 years and worked here for 19 years, currently as the AYMC Director. She has been married to Bert for 34 years, and they have a son, Chris, a daughter-in-law, Cathleen, a daughter, Allison, a son-in-law, Aaron, two granddaughters, Charlotte and Mary Jenness, and a dog, Brady. In her spare time, she runs, weight trains and practices yoga. She'll be happy to show you her Ironman medal if you stop by her office.

December 23, 2017

...and found Mary, Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.

Mary and Joseph had already faced hardships on their way to becoming parents: they weren't married, Joseph wasn't the biological father of Mary's baby, they had traveled many miles on a donkey, there was no room for them in the inn, their baby was born in a stable, he didn't have any clothes, no diapers, no running water; but there they were, a family with a healthy baby whom they adored and with whom God had blessed them. They would face many challenges in the future too; things they had no way of knowing.

Jack and I faced hardships on our way to becoming parents, as most people have. We waited 16 long years to become parents. When we learned the wonderful news that we would be parents we were overjoyed. A few weeks later when Duncan was born, he was very sick and had to be in the NICU (Neonatal Intensive Care Unit) for 10 days. Once we brought him home there was much work to do to keep him clean and fed. He also had to wear a monitor that let us know if he ever stopped breathing. We would face many challenges in the future too; things we had no way of knowing...thank goodness. The difficulties that we faced were different from those faced by Mary and Joseph, but we have the same God to guide, love and sustain us through whatever lies ahead.

I imagine Mary and Joseph were experiencing the same wonder, joy and uncertainty during the first days of Jesus' life that we all experience in our lives.

Thank you, God, for blessing our world with baby Jesus. Help us cherish the blessing of all the children who enrich our lives. Amen.

Juli is the Minister to Preschoolers. She and her husband, Jack, have 2 sons, Duncan and David.

Love



December 24 2017

And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

Becoming a mother was one of the most significant and meaningful moments of my life. I suspected that I was pregnant with Kate, our first-born, during a snowstorm in January 1988, when we were unable to leave our house for days. After more than two years of fertility issues, though, we weren't totally convinced this was actually happening until I was finally able to get out of our neighborhood and to the doctor's office for the official verification. When my doctor, whom I had come to know well, came in and said, "You have made my day!" I was overcome with joy. Once I got over the icky beginning of pregnancy, I relished the times I felt Kate move, have the hiccups, and give me playful kicks. I remember often thinking, "How can anyone who has been pregnant not believe in God?"

Needless to say, our families were thrilled at our news and eager to share it with others. This would be the first grandbaby on Jimmy's side of the family. Two of my sisters were pregnant at the same time, and we enjoyed exchanging pregnancy stories and sharing our hopes and dreams about our babies.

I wonder if Mary, Jesus's mother, had similar experiences and thoughts. Once she overcame her surprise at being pregnant, did she treasure the times the baby moved inside of her? Did she continue to be in awe of the new life growing in her? Did she wonder what her baby would look like? What was the reaction of her family members? Did being pregnant deepen her belief in God? When did she fully realize the significance of the child she was carrying?

What did others wonder when the shepherds shared the news of Jesus's birth? Did they have a hard time believing the story they heard?

Wonder is an intriguing word because of the seemingly endless possibilities it provokes. I hope we never stop wondering!

Dear God, during this Christmas season help us to enjoy and be in awe of the wonderings of your creations. Amen.

Kathy Stewart and her husband, Jim, have two daughters and a son-in-law: Kate and Scott Fogleman, and Meg Stewart. Kathy is Co-director of Education Practices of First Baptist Day School and has been a member of FBG for 35 years.

December 25, 2017

But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.

We have to take time to ponder. We have to take time to reflect. Reflection gives us time to process and make sense of what has happened in the past and to hopefully be more equipped to live fully in the present. Looking back at the life of Jesus now as we read it in the gospels, everything seems so familiar, so normal, but put yourself in Mary's shoes. Here she was, an unimportant person by society's standards, carrying the child of God, who would become the savior of the world. You wouldn't think that the person carrying the child of God would have to give birth in a stable. It must have been amazing and somewhat confusing to see the shepherds and wise men show up to see this child. Mary had to take time to reflect and to ponder these abnormal happenings. Things were being revealed to Mary slowly through her ponderings. What's most important for us to remember is that ponderings only reveal a piece of the full glory of God. At this point of the story, Mary is only pondering what she has experienced so far – the miraculous conception and birth of her son and the strange visitors they received. Later, Mary will ponder the power of her young son's teachings in the synagogue, and after that I'm sure she pondered the power of his healings around Galilee, his death, and his resurrection. Even after Jesus' resurrection, Mary may not have understood the full significance of these events. But with each pondering, she learned a little more. As we begin to move out of the holiday season and back into the the normal pace of life, I encourage you to take time to ponder. Ponder the significant things – and the seemingly insignificant things. Be on the lookout for the slow, steady, unfolding revelation of Jesus the Christ in your own life.

Accompanying God, help us to see and experience your grace and love through the normal and abnormal happenings of our lives. We thank you for the everyday miracles that we are a part of, living in the glory of the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Kendra Plating enjoys her work of spiritual support and pastoral care within the congregation of First Baptist. Kendra has a husband named Chris, a daughter named Hattie, and a dog named Bo. In her free time, she loves to hike, ride bikes, and sit beside a warm crackling fire – all things that give her time to ponder the wonder that is her life.

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