

An abstract painting of a face, rendered in a style reminiscent of Vincent van Gogh's 'Olympia' or 'Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear'. The face is composed of thick, swirling brushstrokes in a variety of colors including yellow, orange, blue, green, and purple. The background is a dark, deep blue with small, white, star-like specks scattered across it. The overall effect is one of intense emotion and spiritual depth.

**2018
ADVENT
DEVOTIONAL**

“O Come, O Come Emmanuel”

United Methodist Hymnal - #211

*O come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer
our spirits by thy advent here:*

And so it begins. For the next month, children will make an extra effort to be good, except when they're not. And those persons we encounter at the mall, in line at the grocery store or post office will be especially courteous, except when they're not. And we will all be more patient and understanding with our colleagues, friends, families, and loved ones, except when we're not. Recognizing the ease with which we can all get swept away in the details of the season, and the continuing quest for the perfect Christmas, we can lose sight of the real joys of the season. Our best memories are not usually the perfection we experienced in the most beautifully decorated tree, or the most succulent turkey. Rather, we cherish the pictures of Uncle John with a bow stuck on his head on Christmas morning, or the overturned bowl of mashed potatoes that the dog enjoyed before we had a chance to even salvage the top layer. The laughter we share around the tree or table is far greater, and of more value than even the most exquisitely wrapped gift. It's almost as though the ninth century words of today's carol were directed right at us, Dayspring. Come and cheer our spirits! It's like the gauntlet has been thrown down. Are you ready to cheer the spirits of those around you, and those you encounter during the season. Emmanuel - God is with us!

*“Behold, a Virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a Son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel”, which means,
“God is with us.”*

MATTHEW 1: 23

Gracious God, your challenge is accepted. We thank you for your faith in us, that we might be your representatives here on earth. Grant us your peace as we journey toward that most beautiful of days, remembering always that you dwell among us, alive in all we meet, both known and unknown. Amen.

“Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates”**United Methodist Hymnal - #213**

*... let us thy inner presence feel;
thy grace and love in us reveal.*

Who doesn't love a makeover show? In our modern day, we can observe people being “fixed” in almost every way, from clothing to haircut, from interior décor to landscaping. We even see people learn how to dance or cook. We ever so anxiously wait for the big reveal. And as we watch, how many of us secretly wish (or not so secretly wish) that one of those experts could turn their magic loose on us. We think about how our own natural “gifts” might be enhanced at the hands of a trained professional. But if we are honest with ourselves, we know that whatever is changed would probably be just a superficial “alteration”. At the risk of sounding trite, it's really about what's inside a person. How many beautiful people do we know that struggle with horrible self images. How many exquisitely decorated homes have we visited that still seem cold and unwelcoming. I'm not suggesting that we don't do our best at maximizing our individual potentials. Rather, during this season of Advent, we should strive for another kind of reveal. What if everyone worked toward revealing God's grace and love, working in them and through them? Does God really care about our manicured lawns, if our striving for perfection takes away time that we might have spent caring for a neighbor, or volunteering at a shelter for the unloved and/or disenfranchised?

*Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
that the King of Glory may come in.*

PSALM 24: 7

God of grace and love, come to us now and fill us. Help us to see the “you” that's present in us. Instead of obsessing over our homes, our yards, and/or our appearances, let us reveal to the world your presence, dwelling in each of us. As we wait for your earthly incarnation, may we be reborn as your children, aglow with your inner presence, revealing your love and light. Amen.

“Hark! the Herald Angels Sing”
United Methodist Hymnal - #240

*“. . . peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!”*

Don't you hate it when you break something valuable? There's something so final about it, even when a shot of Gorilla Glue might be all that's needed to restore the object. I've known people who intentionally purchased really inexpensive glassware, just because they knew they would be breaking all of them in time. (And in their case, not all that much time.) But that seems so fatalistic to me. How awful to assume, even with good reason or historical precedent, that something will eventually be broken. Does one then take greater care with a precious belonging? Well what about a relationship? How can one enter into a relationship with the expectation of it's end? And if self-fulfilling prophecy is really a thing, do we unintentionally sabotage those relationships? Sometimes it's distrust that can destroy a relationship. Sometimes it's selfish or unkind actions and attitudes. All things that cannot be repaired with glue or duct tape, and though no special skill is required, it is far more difficult to repair a broken friendship than a treasured vase, or piece of art. Humankind is known to stray. It's not really our fault - we're given free will and sometimes we just make the wrong choice. But like the prodigal son, God waits for our return. God's grace and mercy is continually offered to us. We need only accept it, it's the Christmas message. God's son, being born on earth, creating a bridge to reconciliation between us and God. No wonder angels sang.

*Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,*

ISAIAH 58: 12

Merciful God, it is so easy for us to get sidetracked. The stresses of the season can overwhelm. Our focus on what we need and what we want can alter our focus, from outward to inward, driving a wedge between ourselves, our colleagues and loved ones, and you. Help us to remember that your mercy is offered freely, and that reconciliation is its own reward. Amen.

“Good Christian Friends, Rejoice!”
United Methodist Hymnal - #224

*He hath opened heaven's door,
and ye are blest forevermore*

What's behind door number two? Haven't we all wondered that very thing watching the game show *Let's Make a Deal*? It can be so nerve wracking to watch someone risk (or bet) their current winnings, to have what is hiding behind the closed door. Hopefully it will not be a "Zonk". Actually, opening doors is always somewhat exciting. Opening a door invites us to another experience, maybe another place or time. Think about an ocean front hotel. You open the door from the hall and immediately are overwhelmed by the beautiful and endless vista of water and waves. Or I vividly remember an M&M's commercial from many years ago. It started with a door being flung open wide, revealing a huge, beautifully decorated, and dazzlingly lit Christmas Tree. (There are cultures in the world where the Christmas Trees are decorated in secret, not revealing them to the children of the family until Christmas Eve, by I'm sure, opening a door.) The open door is such a fitting symbol for the coming of the Christ Child. It was through Jesus's life, teaching, death and resurrection that we learned the secret of eternal life. It is as though that tiny child flung the door open wide, exposing the glory that awaits us on the other side. And unlike *Let's Make a Deal*, there will be no Zonks! We have truly been blest with the prospect of life eternal, and it all seems to begin with an open door. Perhaps that same door through which we welcome everyone to Dayspring.

*. . . for I was hungry and you gave me food,
I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,
I was a stranger and you welcomed me . . .*

MATTHEW 25: 35

God of love and hospitality, show us how to fling open the doors of our hearts, welcoming all into our life experience and space. Help us to understand that we are the truly blest ones, living the way you showed us, following your path to eternal life. May we embrace the stranger, love the unlovable, and practice extravagant hospitality to all we encounter. Amen.

“O Come, All Ye Faithful”
United Methodist Hymnal - #234

*Who would not love thee,
loving us so dearly?*

The above lyric is from the least known stanza of “O Come, All Ye Faithful.” In it, the lyricist speaks of embracing the Christ Child “with love and awe.” Isn’t that the way we would embrace any baby? Surely there’s no other way to embrace a newborn. We experience the awe when we encounter the miracle of life first-hand. And the love comes in the knowledge that this tiny person is dependent on us for absolutely everything. Of course, this is part of the magic of Christmas. This incarnation of God in human form. And not a King, or a warrior, as was expected of a Messiah, but rather a helpless, unremarkable baby. Now to clarify, most unremarkable babies do not have hosts of angels proclaiming their birth. Nor do most unremarkable babies have stars that appear and illuminate their place of birth. And most unremarkable babies do not have sages from foreign countries go on the ultimate quest to find the baby at the place of it’s birth. But perhaps that’s the most remarkable thing of all. God with us, Emmanuel, in the most unremarkable of settings, in the most unremarkable of forms. A baby. We know God loves us. The apostle Paul tells us that nothing can separate us from God’s love. So if that’s the case, how can we keep from loving this tiny child? God’s love knows no bounds, and neither should ours. So here’s the question: If God love us so dearly, and it follows that we would love God the same, shouldn’t we love all the others that God loves?

*Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities,
nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come
shall be able to separate us from the love of God*

ROMANS 8: 38-39

Loving God, your love knows no bounds. Even as we stray, unaware of the consequences of our actions, you surround us in your loving arms, embracing us in love and awe, just as we would embrace our own children. Open our hearts to accept your great love, and the love of others, allowing us to also express and demonstrate the unconditional love you’re taught us, for our family, friends, colleagues, and all those you also love. Amen.

“The Friendly Beasts”
United Methodist Hymnal - #227

*Then all the beasts, by some good spell, in the stable dark
were glad to tell of the gifts they gave Emmanuel.*

Everyone has favorite images of Christmas. Many like the glorious heralding of the angels, over the pastures where shepherds kept watch. Maybe others like the grand procession of the three Magi, resplendent in their finery, riding their camels to Bethlehem and the manger. Then there's always the star, shining overhead, pointing the way to the Christ Child. But my favorite is the stable, and not just the stable, but the animals in it. The gentleness of the sheep and cows stands in such sharp contrast to the rough surroundings. Additionally, the legend of the animals talking on Christmas Eve is hard to ignore. One has to wonder if the animals communicated that night, beyond the stable, in a *101 Dalmatians* kind of communication line, announcing the birth of baby Jesus. The presence of animals has been a source of inspiration for years. The Medieval Matins service for Christmas Eve sang of the animals' presence in the stable (*O magnum Mysterium*). The animals in Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind and the Willows*, sing of the same, as they carol door to door. And here, each animal tells of his or her contribution to the comfort of the Christ Child. Lowly animals? I think not. What could possibly be of more value than the ability to comfort the King of Kings, the Prince of Peace. In this season of Advent/Christmas, we should take another look at the dog or cat lying so peacefully in our chair. Come Christmas Eve, you never know what they might be saying.

*“Who were the first to cry NOWELL?
Animals all, as it befell, in the stable where they did dwell!
Joy shall be theirs in the morning!”*

THE WIND IN THE WILLOWS

God of all creation, The beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea are yours. Yet you have charged us to be stewards of all living things. As the beasts looked on, your Son was brought into the world. We pray that the same world might become one where the lion lay down with the lamb, and the cow and bear might feed together, and a little child shall lead them. Amen.

“Once in Royal David's City”
United Methodist Hymnal - #250

*With the poor, the scorned, the lowly
lived on earth our Savior holy.*

Quick - describe heaven! Is the heaven you imagine all white and bright, with beautiful clouds and harp music pervasive? What about wings? Were there angels with wings and flowing white robes? It's an image that we have become quite comfortable with. We have heard time and time again about the bright white light beckoning those who pass from this world to the next, only to be medically revived and returned to our reality. But there are other ways to see heaven. It could be as simple as the faces of your children, parents, and other loved ones. In fact, I think that perhaps heaven might be found in the company of those we love, and who love us. And in keeping with that thought, think how difficult it is to say goodbye. Like a nice warm bed on a really cold morning, we just don't want to leave and break the spell. And why would we? What could be better than to be comfortable one minute, then thrust into an alien environment. Much like birth - it's no wonder newborn babies cry. Yet . . . at this time of year we think about how God came to live among us. A hostile, alien environment, a dirty stable is not the white and fluffy image we have of heaven. And beyond that, we're told that God's Son, Jesus, lived and ministered to “the least of these”. The poor, the sick, the outcast, the disenfranchised and socially rejected, these were the friends of the One who came to gather us in. Perhaps Jesus' ministry began on day one.

*. . . the Dayspring from on high hath visited us,
to give light to them that sit in darkness
and guide our feet into the way of peace.*

LUKE 1: 78-79

Gracious and loving God, we live in a world of contrasts. Happiness and sadness, darkness and light. We often find it difficult to see through the bad , to experience the good. Let us remember during this season, that Christ, the bringer of light, was born into the most hostile surroundings. And then let us look around us to discern where we might be light to someone else. Amen.

“People Look East”**United Methodist Hymnal - #202**

*Make your house fair as you are able,
trim the tree and set the table.*

Our Senior Pastor, Jane Tews, once confided to me, “there are only so many ways to say, ‘He is Born!’” This was obviously as she prepared for her Christmas (Eve) message. She understood that people are most comfortable with the much beloved story of Angels, Shepherds, Wise Men, the Star etc. But to stand before a congregation, telling the same story over and over can inspire someone to find new and meaningful ways to connect that miraculous birth to who we are, and how we live in this modern day. Still, there are some images, or metaphors, that just won’t go away. One of them concerns the preparation of one’s house for the coming of the Christ Child. A medieval poem tells of two kings. If the King of the land was coming to visit, the preparations would be all encompassing. Floor to ceiling, chairs, table, food, everything that would make one a great host would be attended to. Yet, at the coming of the baby in Bethlehem, there was not even a welcoming place for him to be born, and this was the King of Kings, the Savior of the world! How did we get so messed up? And what can we do now? Surely we understand that the Advent season is a time of preparation. So what preparations can we make for our guest? Far more than setting the table or sweeping the floor. I would propose that this season we mindfully focus our preparations on our hearts, opening fully to our families, friends, and those we have yet to meet.

*Prepare ye the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God,
the crooked straight and the rough places plain.*

ISAIAH 40: 3-4

Gracious and loving God, we were so very lax in welcoming your Son so many years ago. Fill our hearts now with radical hospitality. May we fling open the doors of our hearts this Advent season, welcoming not only the Christ Child, but offering a welcoming embrace, both literally and figuratively, to our loved ones as well as those most in need of our love and resources. Amen.

“Love Came Down at Christmas”
United Methodist Hymnal - #242

*Love was born at Christmas;
star and angel gave the sign.*

In the movie “You’ve Got Mail”, Meg Ryan inadvertently finds herself in the “Cash Only” line of her neighborhood grocery store with only a credit card to pay for her purchase. It’s the night before Thanksgiving, the store is full, and tempers are running high. As she pleads with the checker to accept her card, the man behind her, exasperated by her apparent disregard for the rules exclaims, “There’s a sign!” pointing to the large “Cash Only” sign. She, in her pre-occupation, had just missed it. This is a round about way of asking, how many signs do we miss every day? Truth is, we’re inundated with signs. Some are there to keep us safe (walk/don’t walk, for example). Some are designed to keep us in our place, or to protect someone else’s belongings (keep off the grass!) Still others are strictly informative (Business hours 9 - 5). But there are other signs, the ones that may not be printed and posted. Non-verbal signs are everywhere. What about someone who suddenly stops showing up for a favorite activity, or someone who become unusually reclusive. Even body language, crossed arms, or the inability to make eye contact are all signs, potentially of a far more severe problem. Just as we must heed the signs that keep us safe and protected, we must not miss, or intentionally ignore the signs when a friend or colleague may be actually crying out for our help. We need to keep our eyes open to the signs around us, this Advent and beyond.

*And this shall be a sign unto you;
You shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes,
and lying in a manger.*

LUKE 2: 12

God of Grace, you want only the best for your children. We thank you for your presence with us, and the opportunities for love and service you offer if we will but listen. We pray not to be oblivious to the signs you place around us, but rather, be vigilant in recognizing those signs, better enabling us to be your eyes, ears, and hands in our world, always striving to do your will. Amen.

“O Little Town of Bethlehem”
United Methodist Hymnal - #230

*. . . where meek souls will receive him,
still the dear Christ enters in.*

Thanks to modern technology, I've seen all sorts of things that I would never have had a reason to see. For instance, baby goats in pajamas. Or a raccoon scaling a 25 story building. It would seem that one of the regularly posted videos is of a poor unsuspecting deer finding itself in a convenience store, or worse, someone's home. Usually the poor animal is seen frantically leaping about, doing all kinds of damage before it finds its way back out the door and into its far more familiar environment. The animal was certainly an unwelcome guest, one that did not receive an invitation to enter. For the past 10 days I've spoken much about the season of Advent being a time for us to open our hearts to welcome the Christ Child and others. But the founder of Methodism, John Wesley saw it differently. Wesley spoke of three forms of grace: Justifying, Sanctifying, and Prevenient. Justifying and Sanctifying grace fuel God's forgiveness and the on-going presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. It's Prevenient grace that may be the most remarkable, misunderstood, and un-earned. Defined as "going before", Prevenient grace exists even before we ask. Certainly God will respond to our invitation to enter our lives, but through Prevenient grace, God is already there. During the Advent/Christmas season, we do experience a rebirth, the coming again of the baby born in a manger. But an invitation is not necessary. God already lives in our hearts.

*Do not be like them,
for your Father knows what you need
before you ask him.*

MATTHEW 6:8

God of the open heart, we marvel at the breadth of your love. Even at our most unlovable, you live in our hearts and offer us grace and forgiveness. As we ponder the unnecessary act of invitation, we feel unworthy to be recipients of your grace. But it's there, today, and all the days after. Make us worthy Lord, to claim your ever present grace, and live according to your will. Amen.

“On This Day Earth Shall Ring”
United Methodist Hymnal - #248

*“. . . born on earth to save us,
peace and love he gave us.”*

Eternal life. Not always the main focus of a Christmas carol, but certainly a main point of our faith. It's just usually more discussed around Easter. But many of the early carol texts revolved around eternal life, usually by way of salvation or redemption. I love redemption stories. They're my favorite. You know, the selfish, reclusive person has some kind of a life changing experience, and they emerge totally different people. George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life* sees what the world would have been had he not been born. And in my favorite, Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, we see Ebenezer Scrooge travel from past to future, looking at his life, ultimately becoming a new person. And geez, the Hallmark Channel has some kind of redemption story playing on television 24/7. But often I wonder why things have to get so bad before they can get better? For Scrooge, it was his impending death that changed him. For George Bailey, it was the bleak lives of his mother, and his wife, Mary. We are not blest with the ability to see what the world would be like without us. But it is an interesting exercise. The early church focused on the gift of eternal life, by way of salvation through Jesus Christ. Born on earth to save us! This was, and is, the Good News of Christ's coming. Humankind was blest at God's incarnation as human. And redemption can be thought of as a Christmas gift, or an ongoing blessing. As Tiny Tim would say, "God bless us, every one."

*God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son,
that whosoever believeth in him
should not perish, but have eternal life.*

JOHN 3:16

God of grace, we thank you for the gift of redemption, the gift of salvation, and the gift of eternal life. Bless us as we live day to day, doing our best to reflect your spirit is all we do and say. Though unworthy of your love and grace, we will do our best this season to emerge as new, redeemed people. Open our hearts to the needs of others, and then bless us, every one. Amen.

“Joseph Dearest, Joseph Mine”
The Faith We Sing - #2099

*Gladly, dear one, lady mine, help I cradle this child of thine;
God's own light on us both shall shine . . .*

So what's the deal with Joseph? We know he was there, so the story tells us. We even read that he was visited by an angel who explained the surprising (to say the least) pregnancy of Mary, imploring him not to leave, but rather to stay, serving as the earthly father of the Son of God. In this snippet of lyric, Joseph offers his parenting help to Mary, understanding that they have both been blest with the arrival of this precious gift. But shortly thereafter, he vanishes. He, Mary and Jesus flee to Egypt, escaping Herod's slaughter of the “innocents”, but is not heard from again. This good man, who played such a major role in Christ's birth, is gone. Talk about a thankless job! But it's easy to remember the multitude of thankless jobs we have all undertaken. In fact, many of the most generous and loving acts we may offer up, often go unthanked. This, then, becomes about those random acts of kindness that many of us strive to include in our day to day activities. It feels so good to make someone's day. In fact, their gratitude is hardly necessary, if even desired. Sitting in my car at Starbuck's Drive-thru, being informed that the person in the car ahead of me just paid for my coffee is definitely a “day maker”. I can hardly wait then, to do the same for the car behind me, knowing how it will make them feel. Think of how many of these kind gestures could really make someone's day, while taking almost no effort on our part. OK - your turn!

*Thus says the LORD of hosts:
Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy
to one another.*

ZECHARIAH 7: 9

God of kindness. God of love. You gave us the example of perfect love in your Son, Jesus. Even the simplest act of kindness can be transformational both for the intended recipient, and for ourselves. You ask so little from us, and demonstrate great patience when we are slow to respond. Help us to heed your call to love kindness, and do justice, as we humbly walk with you, Amen.

“The First Noel”**United Methodist Hymnal - #245**

*. . . and to the earth it gave great light,
and so it continued both day and night.*

Do you think that darkness gets a bad rap? The metaphors are everywhere. We are encouraged to understand: Light = good, Dark = bad. Why else would Darth Vader be from the “Dark Side”? But in the dark, we can see the stars in the heavens. We can see the Northern Lights (if we're lucky enough). We sit in a dark room at the movies, and many of us sleep in completely darkened rooms. You can't tell me that my nice comfortable bed is bad. So what about light? Well . . . it's far stronger than dark. The tiniest light can erase the darkness. Light can keep us safe. Think about a lighthouse. Or that firm footing is impossible in complete darkness. Why else would there be an issue with the “people who walked in darkness”? Closer to home, the “Dayspring” is believed to be the coming of light into the world. The original stained glass window (in the Fellowship Hall) is a perfect depiction of that. The birth of the Christ Child was announced by the presence of a star. Be it a navigational device, or simply illumination for the Magi, a star filled the sky with its light. And like a light house, guided the 3 Kings to Bethlehem. That's why we light candles on Christmas Eve. When we share our individual flame with those around us, the light increases exponentially. And while dark may not be really bad, the light, Christ's light, illuminates everything around us, but *only* when we share it. You know, it doesn't have to be a candle. What might your light be?

*O send out your light and your truth;
let them lead me; let them bring me
to your holy hill, and to your dwelling.*

PSALM 43: 3

God of light and life, we come to you as those who have walked in darkness. We long for your light to illuminate our path. We draw strength, assurance, and stability from your light. Help us, guide us to discern our own light, giving us the ability to understand where we might illumine those we encounter. Let us, like your Son, be a source of light and life in our world. Amen.

"It Came upon the Midnight Clear"**United Methodist Hymnal - #218**

*. . . when peace shall over all the earth
its ancient splendors fling*

Once upon a time, a friend who was visiting worship dared me to see how many alternate harmonies I could cram into one hymn. It was Advent, so I chose *It Came upon a Midnight Clear*. It was awesome. It's no wonder that it is a favorite of jazz musicians. Probably the finely crafted melody enables that kind of variation. But the most interesting part of this carol is in the cyclical nature of the lyric. We hear of the angels, pronouncing the birth of Jesus. But that is followed by a plea to stop, and take a minute to again contemplate the angels' song. Finally, the prophesy that peace will prevail, and the whole world will declare "Peace on Earth" back to the angels. Well . . . we don't seem all that close to real peace on earth. In Seminary, I clung to the belief that all people were capable of good, and that there could actually be a time when peace could prevail. Not to seem overly negative, but it seems less likely now than ever. What are the roadblocks to real and lasting peace? Fear? Distrust? The desire to rise by bringing down someone else? The thought of a world without conflict is perhaps an unrealistic dream. But I prefer to think that each one of us can do our part to bring about that peace. Opening our hearts to those who think, look and perhaps act differently than we do is a good place to start. And if you want to offer a prayer for that peace, it's easy. Just read the Peace Pole at our campus entrance. "May peace prevail on earth."

*His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace for the
throne of David and his kingdom.*

ISAIAH 9: 7

God of peace, we pray for peace on earth, yet are constantly reminded that it is an unlikely reality. As St. Francis said, make us instruments of your peace. Allow us to put aside petty differences that divide us, and instead, sow seeds of peace and unity in our families, our workplaces, our communities and our world. We acknowledge that it is your will, now and always. Amen.

"To a Maid Engaged to Joseph"
United Methodist Hymnal - #215

*"So be it; I am ready
according to your word."*

I have never been visited by an angel. At least not one that I was aware of. Yet in the Christmas story, it seems that people are having visits from angels all the time! How would one know? In Renaissance paintings angels usually have flowing white gowns and big wings (except for Botticelli's *The Mystical Nativity*, where the angels are dressed in white, brown, and pink, and always look more like Neapolitan ice cream - but I digress). But what if they looked just like us? Who could forget Clarence in *It's a Wonderful Life*? Except for some outdated clothes, he looked pretty much like everyone else. And my personal favorite, Dudley in *The Bishop's Wife*. Cary Grant looked just like . . . well, Cary Grant. The Hallmark Channels have angels everywhere, and there's no way to tell them from anyone else. So how do we know that we have not been visited by angels? And for that matter, what really qualifies someone as an angel? With a small change of my understanding of what an angel actually is, I can guarantee that I have been visited by any number of angels. From the doctor who discovered my heart murmur, to the person who introduced me to my wife, to the people who just wouldn't give up on me, to the person who loved me when I was at my most unlovable. The search for angels in our midst is not that different than the vision of Christ in someone else's face, or the God sightings we have in the most mundane experiences. Be aware!!!

*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,
for by doing that some have entertained
angels without knowing it.*

HEBREWS 13:2

Gracious and loving God, open our eyes to your presence. Let us not look beyond those we encounter, but rather into the souls of your children, our brothers and sisters. You do not deny your children. We, therefore, should be loving and accepting, opening our arms as well. As we love you, and you have loved us, guide us to show that same love to all your children. Amen.

“Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming”
United Methodist Hymnal - #216

*. . . It came a floweret bright,
amid the cold of winter . . .*

We live in the desert . . . we don't understand winter. Well, we understand that it's dark in the morning until 7, or 7:30. We understand that traffic increases, and golf courses raise their greens fees. We may even know that maybe two nights a year, we have to cover all of our plants to keep them from freezing back. But for shoveling snow, scraping our windshields, salting our sidewalks, we're clueless. Most everywhere else, however, winter is understood, along with fall, spring and summer. It's all part of a cycle. Like the Paschal Mystery we celebrate on Easter, the seasons echo Life - Death - Resurrection. And during the winter, one longs for renewal. I have friends that publish pictures of the first crocus of spring on their Facebook page. So living here, where things bloom year round, we would not be surprised to see a vibrant, beautiful flower in the middle of winter. But a beautiful purple crocus poking its head out of the snow must be a shocking sight. A blooming flower in the midst of winter, a sign that life is renewing, and the cycle is beginning again. Throughout time, the rose has often represented The Virgin Mary or Christ. So the image of a vibrant rose, abloom in the snow should evoke the same startling image as a King born in a stable. Today, would anything be startling? I believe it should. As we enjoy our abundance, we should be startled by those with so little. Could we be that blooming flower for someone else's winter?

*Brother, sister, let me serve you,
let me be as Christ to you.*

THE SERVANT SONG
RICHARD GILLARD

Loving and generous God, like the lilies of the field, we should want for nothing. We sing that all we have needed your hand has provided. Yet the voices of the world tell us that we need more and more. Help us to learn the concept of “enough”. And then, show us how our surplus can better our community and our world. Help us to reflect Christ through our generosity. Amen.

“What Child Is This?”**United Methodist Hymnal - #219**

*So bring him incense, gold, and myrrh, come,
peasant, king, to own him; . . .*

“You give me a book, I give you a tie. Aunt Martha has always wanted an orange squeezer and Uncle Henry can do with a new pipe. All the stockings are filled, all that is, except one. And we have even forgotten to hang it up. The stocking for the child born in a manger. Its his birthday we're celebrating.” So goes the ending sermon in the final scene of *The Bishop's Wife*. It follows the decision by a wealthy woman to donate her millions to help the poor, rather than build a grand cathedral. It ends with the plea for “loving kindness, warm hearts, and the outstretched hand of tolerance.” Words as appropriate today as they were 71 years ago. The giving of gifts has become a huge part of our Christmas celebrations. Now understand, I'm not knocking gifts. Time spent finding just the right gift is time allowing us to focus fully on our colleagues, friends, and families. The perfect gift shows that someone else gave real thought to our likes and needs. There is a school of thought that the giving of gifts began with the Magi. But it's the “peasant, king” part that truly reveals the meaning of Christmas. Peasant, kings, and everyone in between, coming to the manger to worship the baby. No one is excluded, no one is turned away. The stable is a welcoming place where all can kneel, and pay homage, regardless of their station. I could print Dayspring's Welcome statement here. How nice to think of Dayspring as open and welcoming as that stable.

*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer
slave or free, there is no longer male and female;
for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*

GALATIANS 3:28

Compassionate God, you see us all as your beloved children, equal in love and privilege. Yet even with your example, we are still tempted to draw lines, separating and excluding many of our brothers and sisters for weak and selfish reasons. As you see us all the same, help us to put aside our petty prejudice and bias, and create one world, grounded in love and respect. Amen.

“Sing We Now of Christmas”
United Methodist Hymnal - #237

*Angels called to shepherds, “Leave your
flocks at rest, journey forth to Bethlehem”*

For many people, a good old fashioned road trip is the ultimate vacation. We have glamorized that *convertible top down, wind blown hair, no real schedule, and the feeling of complete freedom* thing. For people glued to a clock 24 hours a day, this must sound like heaven. Even when the ultimate destination is known, the journey is still the best part of any trip. But what about a journey into the unknown? What kind of faith does it take to make that kind of a leap, either literally or figuratively? In our lives, we find ourselves faced with countless journeys, some we embrace, some we don't. Like a fork in the road, Robert Frost referenced it in his poem *The Road Not Taken*: “Two roads diverged in a wood and I - I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference.” We often know the outcome, or destination of the journeys we face, and yet, find we have no choice but to take them. A common leap of faith might be a marriage, a new home, or a new job. Standing by and caring for a failing loved one at the end of their journey, or a new-born at the start of theirs. But I believe that there are choices to be made regarding our journeys each and every morning. We decide what kind of person we will be. We decide how we will relate to our fellow travelers on this life journey. We even make a decision, conscious or un-, of whether or not to be happy. It seems too simplistic, but let's not forget, we are not on this journey alone.

*. . . neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers,
nor things present, nor things to come, will be able
to separate us from the love of God . . .*

ROMANS 8: 38-39

Gracious God, you are steadfast and merciful. You don't punish your children for their folly, but rather, gently nudge us toward your will, for us and our world. We pray that we may more fully discern your way, as we chart our courses. You, who set the stars in the skies, guide us, that we might better journey, straying less from your path of compassion, generosity, and grace. Amen.

“Away in a Manger”
United Methodist Hymnal - #217

*. . . I ask you to stay close by me forever,
and love me, I pray;*

Good byes can be difficult. Of course, there's always a house guest that has overstayed their welcome, but for the most part, it's hard to say "good bye". Could it be that it's about maintaining the status quo? We get comfortable with things the way they are. Certainly our modern lives, and our tendency to keep way too many balls in the air, contribute to the feeling of personal chaos. Remember the guy that would spin all those plates on really long sticks. As he got more and more of them going, he would have to go back to keep the first ones spinning (young people - this was "entertainment" back in the day.) So we pray for the baby Jesus to stay close. Maybe its about acceptance . . . being loved and cared for. Those among us with big families have it easy. Even when conflicts arise, you still know that someone "has your back". I recently attended a memorial service for a woman, 95 years old with 138 children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. A blessing for sure. But for others like me, with a small - extremely small - family, we need to look elsewhere, developing our own families, if you will, from our friends and colleagues. I am so very grateful for my Dayspring family, and my choir families. They have been there to support and care for me and my loved ones. But that is what church should be all about. Those who are searching for a loving community should be able to find it at 1365 E. Elliot Road. Don't you agree?

*I was glad when they said to me,
“Let us go to the house of the Lord!”
For the sake of my friends, I will say, “Peace be within you.”*
PSALM 122: 1, 8

God of love, we talk of open heart, open minds, and open doors. But do we really live it? We pray that you would imbue us with your radical hospitality. Help us to open our hearts, minds, and then our doors. To all those feeling unloved or disenfranchised, may we be a beacon of love and hope, embracing all who come to us for community, belonging and grace. Amen.

“Break Forth, O Beauteous Heavenly Light”**United Methodist Hymnal - #223**

*Break forth, O beauteous heavenly light,
and usher in the morning;*

December 21, the shortest day of the year. Often referred to as “The Longest Night”, it is not unusual to find many churches, Dayspring included, offering services of varying types. We have held Healing Services, Taizé Services, musical Evensong Services, even Blue Christmas Services for those for whom the holidays are not a time of joy. In fact, the date for Christmas was probably originally chosen for its proximity to the winter solstice. The poet beautifully describes the breaking of the dawn, ushering in the morning. But I’m thinking that today, December 21st, the shortest day/longest night, should be a day/night when we consider that time before the dawn breaks, the hours that can be the longest, darkest, and loneliest. Personal loss, financial stresses, loneliness, all work to create a barrier to what we might know as Christmas Spirit. Everyone should experience to the joys of the season. So . . . what can we, the lucky ones, do for those who might be suffering at this time of year? Lending a hand, or a shoulder could be a start. Opening your home to someone who has experienced loss. Secret Santa, Angel Trees, and Family Promise are all ways we can help. Still . . . one of the easiest, and most meaningful things we can do is just be present with someone else. Listen, Help with a task. Maybe provide a meal. Be someone else’s beauteous light, and usher in their morning. After all . . . joy comes in the morning!

*just as you did it to one of the least of these
who are members of my family,
you did it to me.*

MATTHEW 25: 40

Comforting God, we acknowledge that this time of year can be challenging. So many people are dealing with loss, stress, despair, and hopelessness. We thank you for your ever-present love that surrounds us today and always. Guide our steps, Lord, that we might find ways to help, to befriend, to comfort and to support our brothers and sisters in their distress. Amen.

“Angels We Have Heard on High”
United Methodist Hymnal - #238

*What the gladsome tidings be
which inspire your heavenly song.*

“Tidings of great joy which shall be to all people.” Those familiar words from the Nativity story as told by St. Luke, are committed to so many of our hearts, that we could recite it in total, much like the Lord’s Prayer, or the 23rd Psalm. A host of angels appears above the Galilean countryside, resplendent, announcing the birth of Jesus. (I have a recording of a Welsh carol, sung by a Welsh women’s choir, that I’ve decided must be what the angels sounded like.) We’re told the shepherds were “sore afraid”, but I wonder if today we would even notice. Our world has become so inundated with noise/music that we are pretty much oblivious. Everywhere from McDonalds to Costco to the gas station blares out the latest tunes. There’s even a science that determines what kind of music can actually make people more apt to spend money, or eat faster. In a Washington D.C. subway station, renowned violinist Joshua Bell, posing as a busker, played his violin for a couple hours at rush hour. Actually playing the repertoire he had played in concert the night before (with tickets costing several hundred dollars each), and yet no one stopped to listen. In fact only a couple people, one of them a child, bothered to drop a coin into his open case. We have become immune to beauty. In this amazing world, how much do we miss every day? We should make a resolution, right now, to heighten our senses and fully experience the amazing beauty all around us!

*And God saw everything that he had made,
and, behold, it was very good.*

GENESIS 1: 31

Creator God, we marvel at your world, the beauty of your creation. But so often, God, our schedules and commitments blind us to our surroundings. During this season, make us more aware, more open to the magnificence around us. Help us recognize your hand in the art we see, the music we hear, and the world we experience. Fill our hearts with the desire for beauty. Amen.

“In the Bleak Mid-Winter”**United Methodist Hymnal - #221**

*. . . but his mother only, in her maiden bliss,
worshipped the beloved with a kiss.*

At this point, we have examined nearly every aspect of the Advent/Christmas season. On the four Sundays of Advent we have lit (or will light) candles representing hope, joy, peace, and love. Those, by the way, should be year round practices, not just things we think about during Advent. So much of the story is bigger than life; Angels, Wise Men, Shepherds. But amidst all the celebration, we often look right past the more intimate side of the story. A baby was born. Mary had been visited by an angel and told that she was chosen to birth God's Son. She very well could have dealt with morning sickness, decreased energy, swollen ankles, odd cravings, and all the other things that can accompany pregnancy. And then there's the pain involved with giving birth (that you forget? Really?) And giving birth in a stable? Today that would be akin to giving birth in a taxi. And the only person to help is the hapless father? Well, I might paint a negative picture, but I think it's important to keep this miracle at a human level. That was the point, wasn't it? God incarnate, Emmanuel. So what could be more human than a mother and child. And amidst all the activity, a mother gently kisses her baby. It's really a call to re-think our own celebrations. Big parties and special events can be fun, but as Christmas Day approaches, let's focus on the more intimate side. Hold tight to those you love. Celebrate your relationships and treasure your loved ones.

*And all that heard it wondered at those things
told them by the shepherds.*

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

LUKE 2:18-19

Loving God, return our hearts to Bethlehem. Let us experience again the young mother and her infant son. We hush, in awe at the humble surroundings, cradling a King. Let us remember, Lord, our loved ones. May we embrace each other as a mother cradles her baby. Fill our hearts with love and appreciation that no one might feel unloved or taken for granted. Amen.

“Silent Night, Holy Night”**United Methodist Hymnal - #239**

*. . . While earth's peoples, with one voice,
Jesus their brother proclaim!*

There is so much lore about the origins of this most beloved of all Christmas carols. Rumors of a failing organ in the church at Oberndorf, Austria, may not be true. No wheezing pipes, no mice chewing through the leather trackers. The organ, in fact, was in use for several years after. Rather, the composition of such songs for Midnight Mass was a common practice. What we do know is that the curate, Joseph Mohr, gave the poem to organist, Franz Gruber, who set it to music. It was performed for the first time, accompanied by guitar, at Midnight Mass, Christmas Eve 1818, exactly 200 years ago. My selection of a lyric actually is translated from the original German. The original lyric concerns itself far more with salvation, and God's incarnation as human, than does the “sleep in heavenly peace” version we are familiar with. But it might also be noted, that the original piece was much more of a folk song than a lullaby. Still, something about the lilting melody has maintained its popularity for 200 years. Today, we to envision the Virgin Mary, supported by Joseph, rocking her infant son to sleep, surrounded by a magical glow, with heavenly beams shining into the stable, illuminating the tiny king's face. It's our story, our history. The birth we have celebrated and re-imagined for nearly two thousand years. In the stillness of that holy night, the world changed for all time. Love was born that night, and that is what we should be celebrating.

*And she brought forth her first-born son, and wrapped him in
swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger;
because there was no room for them in the inn.*

LUKE 2: 7

God of peace, on this holiest of nights, we pray that you would again come into our lives like you did so many years ago. Make yourself known in the faces of our loved ones, and all those we encounter. May the love born that night soften our hearts, as we put others before ourselves. And finally, help us to discern your will, that we might bring about your kingdom here and now. Amen.

“Joy to the World!”**United Methodist Hymnal - #246**

*let every heart prepare him room,
and heaven and nature sing!*

Well - I've made it for 24 days without a huge push for music. I guess it's time. Hans Christian Anderson wrote, "Where words fail, music speaks." It's true. I've become aware that even in the most profoundly moving scenes in a motion picture or television show, the music underscoring it has more to do with my instinctive reaction than the scene itself. The hymn lyricists and even the authors of the Bible realized the same things. Why else would something as significant as Jesus's birth be accompanied by singing? In the movie, *The Shawshank Redemption*, Morgan Freeman speaks of music, "I'd like to think they were singing about something so beautiful, it can't expressed in words, and it makes your heart ache because of it. I tell you, those voices soared higher and farther than anybody in a great place dares to dream. And for the briefest of moments, every last man in Shawshank felt free." Music has the power to transport us to another place and time. Music can help us celebrate, or comfort us when nothing else can. Music is the ultimate gift from God. Why else would angels sing at the birth of Jesus? And it continues today. The carols we sing elevate our celebration of this season far beyond what it might be otherwise. "Joy to the world! The Lord has come!" Today, tomorrow, next year, and all the years after, may music fill your life with hope, joy, peace and love, that you might always hear the angels' song. Merry Christmas!

*“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those
whom he favors!”*

LUKE 2: 14

Gracious and loving God, like a choir of angels, we gather to sing praises at the arrival of your Son. We thank you for the gift of love, and the example set by the newborn King. But we also thank you for music, giving us the most beautiful way to praise you for all you have done. Bless our song, that we might join the angels again in welcoming the Christ Child. Amen.