

Rejoice



*cover art by Pam Allen*

*“On that day the wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,  
The desert shall rejoice and blossom:  
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,  
and rejoice with joy and singing.”  
Isaiah 35:1*

Our theme for Advent this year is “Rejoice!” based on Isaiah’s prophecy about signs of new life in the wilderness, the blossoming of hope in parched places. The crocus in the desert signals the presence and power of God, so those who are weary or fearful can take heart in the midst of desolation. According to Isaiah, so great is the joy and so profound the healing Emmanuel God brings that those who were lame now leap and those who were speechless now sing.

We live, however, in the tensions between the reign of God established by Jesus and the final fulfillment of that reign. The needs of today’s world cry out to us. We, too, yearn for salvation, for the one who enables new life to blossom within our very souls. The promise held before us offers God’s love and mercy, God’s power to heal and restore. All Creation – even the barren desert – joins in this transformation.

You hold in your hands a book of rejoicing! Twenty-eight Lake Shore writers have pondered Isaiah’s words and interpreted the prophet’s meaning through the lens of their own lives in 2010. As you read these meditations, reflect on the questions our writers considered: How have you experienced God’s transforming power to heal? What sign is a symbol of new life that speaks to the deepest places of your heart? As you reflect on the needs of the world, for what does your spirit year for this Advent season? Have you ever experienced the blossoming of hope in a barren place?

The word that shines through my reading of these poems, prayers, and reflections is “incarnation.” The meaning of Christ’s birth for writers is evidenced through the glimpses of hope they have experienced in their own lives. So if you journey with them from the first day of Advent through Christmas Day, you will see signs of Christ’s incarnation in babies and elderly folks; teaching lecterns and hands baking bread; birds and hospitals; and crocuses – lots of crocuses!

Signs of joy to you this Advent season!

**Sharlande Sledge**

## November 28

“Advent begins in the dark.” Almost every year, this is how I begin my First Sunday of Advent sermon—Advent begins in the dark. Acknowledging the darkness into which light comes always comes as a bit of a relief for me. The outside tells me that to make this season meaningful I need to have it all together—everything from my house to my “to do” list to my shopping. But Advent reminds me that this season has nothing to do with having it all together. Instead Advent means that in spite of—more accurately because of—the all together mixed-upness of the world, of our lives, God comes. One of my favorite prayers of this season is from the Iona community. These words begin Advent in a way far better than I could say. Blessings upon you as you, as we, enter this season together.

When the world was dark  
and the city was quiet,  
you came.

You crept in beside us.  
And no one knew.

Only the few who dared to believe  
that God might do something different.

Will you do the same this Christmas, Lord?

Will you come into the darkness of tonight's world;

not the friendly darkness  
as when sleep rescues us from tiredness,

but the fearful darkness, in which people have stopped believing  
that war will end  
or that food will come  
or that a government will change  
or that the Church cares?

Will you come into that darkness  
and do something different  
to save your people from death and despair?

Will you come into the quietness of this town,

not the friendly quietness  
as when lovers hold hands,

but the fearful silence when the phone has not rung  
the letter has not come,

the friendly voice no longer speaks,

the doctor's face says it all?

Will you come into that darkness,  
and do something different,  
not to distract, but to embrace your people?

And will you come into the dark corners  
and the quiet places of our lives?

We ask this not because we are guilt-ridden  
or want to be,

but because the fullness our lives long for  
depends upon us being as open and vulnerable to you  
as you were to us, when you came,

wearing no more than diapers,  
and trusting human hands  
to hold their maker.

Will you come into our lives,  
if we open them to you  
and do something different?

When the world was dark  
and the city was quiet  
you came.

You crept in beside us.

Do the same this Christmas, Lord.

Do the same this Christmas.

Amen.

**Dorisanne Cooper**

*Prayer from Cloth for the Cradle.*

## November 29

*“On that day the wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom” . . . like new growth in parched places.*

“Resiliency” has many definitions, but essentially it is the ability to return to some sense of harmony following loss or a stressful situation. Resilient people seem to have in common many characteristics that allow them to find meaning in life. I think Isaiah’s words apply to resilient people. Encouraging “new growth in parched places” is what resilient people do.

The resilient people I have the good fortune of visiting for Meals & Wheels inspire me. While I never the word “rejoice” in everyday conversation. I’m inspired by those whose life stories seem to say “rejoice!,” like Mr. H whose defenseless WWII battalion found his men looking straight into the barrels of the enemy’s rifles from a forest in far away Germany. But instead of firing, the Germans surrendered, knowing that the war was near its end and “that they would be treated fairly.” Mr. H found his faith that day, lived it, and relied on it the rest of his life. I leave his house feeling grateful.

Resilient people *engage their problems*, such as Ms. W, who at age 90 has just been diagnosed with diabetes. “Darn,” she says smiling, “I thought I had it made, but now I’ve got to change my diet!” Then she goes about informing me of what she has learned about diabetes, after *engaging* the problem through diligent inquiry. Her *sense of humor* makes the visit a pleasure.

*Finding meaning in life* following loss after loss is what Ms. S does as she manages to make phone calls for political candidates she and her deceased husband would support. She may not be able to vote, but she can encourage others to do so. She still has an influence in her world, and that’s what matters to her.

Mrs. T, crushed by poverty all her life, lives in a small shack with electricity and running water as her only modern conveniences. Her old bathroom is unusable and she burns wood in a stove for winter heat. She loves her dog, but what keeps her going is being able to walk to the small-wood framed church down the block. And visiting her on her front porch is pure joy. She’s just positive. Even when asked if a group of Baylor students could visit her to hear her story, she never hesitated. “Bring ‘em on!” she says with her toothless grin, “I’m always home unless my doctor calls me.” She’s going to *pass her knowledge and wisdom to others*.

Thank you, God, for the privilege of serving your inspirational children. May we model what they teach us when we struggle with life’s challenges.

Van Jones

## November 30

Daffodil. Jonquil. Narcissus. What flower says, "Rejoice, spring is coming!" better than this family of white and yellow garden friends?

My family, like many poor Southern families after the Civil War, had few belongings as they settled this untamed wilderness of Texas. But one thing most of them brought with them from the death of their old life was the flaky little dried clod of a bulb looking like a deformed onion. The Perkins, Lowreys, and Mercers -- my great-grandparents -- like others from the deep South, dug up little pieces of the life they left behind and carried them the thousand miles to start a new home. The flowers symbolized new family beginnings but also the rebirth, restoration, and resurrection of their faith.

To passersby in late winter, these cups of purity and sunlight in the front garden joyously heralded spring's rapid approach. The paperwhite proclaimed, "Don't despair . . . one more month!" The King Alfred announced, "Fear not, one more week!" They also said, "Good people live here. Stop by. New neighbors."

Time went by and the colonies of daffodils, iris and other bulbs spread across the new Texans' yards and fields, inviting every one of their children and grandchildren to dig a few to take with them as they, too, spread across Texas and the planet. The message we take, like the bulbs we plant, has not changed appreciably in the one hundred and fifty years since my family journeyed west.

Rejoice! There is always a new beginning. God has not forsaken his world to the darkness or us to a cold and empty existence. Christ's warmth and radiance is always present even if we do not always sense it.

**Rick Allen**

## December 1

Our home church in Waco, Texas, has set the theme for Advent this year in a single word—“Rejoice!” Every year we look forward to participating in Advent through the devotional book that is written and produced by the members of Lake Shore Baptist Church. They are a creatively ornery bunch of Baptists who take their calling to be Christians seriously. They do not take themselves too seriously, though, and have modeled for us through the years Christian community in its Raggedy Anne glory. So I have been thinking on rejoicing.

Wednesday night after church soup supper, the girls and women gathered in the sanctuary for choir practice. I sat at the piano looking at the faces that have become so dear to me in these past few months, listened to the teasing and laughter, and wondered, “How in the world did I get here? I am an accompanist, not a choir director.” Little Angel tugged on my shirt sleeve and said, “I am singing in our choir, Miss Peggy!” There was my answer. Our inter-generational women’s choir will be singing Natalie Sleeth’s “A Hymn of Promise” in worship Sunday morning—altos, sopranos, a descant, occasional harmony of voices. But beyond the sound of the music is a bubbling up joy in the new life that is coming to be at Calvary Presbyterian. Our family ties are growing stronger as we open our arms to new folks who visit and feel the difference. I am scared to death and plumb happy at the same time.

Rejoicing comes easy when all is well with your life and your soul. It gets harder to rejoice when things go wrong. When I forget to put the parking brake on the new four-wheeler and it rolls down the little hill to crash into the clothesline, rejoicing is not what comes to mind. When we leave the beach vacation early because Mama has been taken to the emergency room with what turned out to be vertigo, it was hard to rejoice on the long ride across North Carolina. When I feel overwhelmed with all that has to be done; when I look at that dreaded to do list and see all that has not been done; when I get stuck in my circular thinking racetrack that has no beginning and no end, rejoicing does not come naturally.

First Thessalonians 5:16-20 tells me the secrets of wholehearted rejoicing. *“Rejoice always... pray constantly...give thanks...” Do not quench the Spirit! Rejoicing does not stand alone. It comes as a package deal with prayer, thanksgiving and allowing the Holy Spirit to flow through you to the world beyond. So here is my focus for Advent this year: Dear Lord God, keep me on track this Advent as I try to live rejoicing everyday. Keep me on my knees praying. Help me remember all I have been given so that I might have a thank you list as well as a to-do list. And above all, Lord, let your Spirit not be quenched in me by fear or frustration. I do so want to be a living witness for you. May it be so, please, God?*

**Peggy Hester**

## December 2

Last March I visited Shalom Children's Center in Ghana. The children went to school in a bright pink building. Every day girls would walk through the thick bush and up the steep hill from the well with buckets of water on their heads. They would fill the huge bright blue buckets outside the classrooms. But the land all around the school was dry and dusty and wide open with only one tree.

One afternoon I was standing under the only tree on the grounds outside Shalom. It gave a little bit of shade, so this is where Christiana and the others served the children breakfast and lunch. Even in the shade, I was so hot that my clothes were soaking wet with sweat.

Then I heard the headmaster ring the bell and 230 children came pouring out of the doors of the school. Some stopped at water containers and dipped their cups in to get drinks. And some children rushed out onto the "playground," running and playing. And then I realized that it must be recess for the children, even though they had no play equipment, balls, or anything.

As I watched to see what the children were going to do, I noticed a circle of children about 7 or 8 years-old playing with an object. They were playing soccer, kicking something around from one child to another.

I walked out on the playground to get a closer look. I couldn't believe what I saw. They were kicking around a piece of plastic sack like an H.E.B. bag. It was the color of the dusty playground, crumpled up in the form of a ball.

The children had figured out where their goals were on the "playground" and were having the time of their life, taking turns like they were kicking the sack to a goal. They played like they had two real goalposts and a real, honest-to-goodness soccer ball.

When I think of "joy" this Christmas, I will think of that afternoon in Ghana and how little it took for the children to have a good time. They were having so much fun with absolutely nothing. They just had dust and dirt and every so often the tiniest bit of breeze blowing the soccer ball/bag an extra few feet toward the goal.

**Pattie Herbert**

## December 3

Last summer, in the middle of the summer preaching theme on water, the contrarian in me decided that we needed to be reminded why water has such appeal, and why we appreciate so much as a metaphor for the spiritual life. We read from Psalm 63: "O God, I seek you—my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where no water is." We considered the barren places of life and texts where the juxtaposition of thirst and water create fertile reflection.

William Brown writes about water imagery in the Psalms and the wide range of uses—from chaos and overabundance of water to dryness and lack of water. Brown says "the metaphor of thirst in a parched land connotes the psalmist's desperate yearning for God's saving presence." Ps. 63 actually shows us two different metaphors—one of thirst (v. 1; "my soul thirsts for you") and one of hunger (v. 5; "my soul is feasted"). Both of these are connected to the Hebrew word, *nepshesh*, which is often translated as "soul" or "life." *Nepshesh* is our entire being, at its deepest level and encompassing all of our humanness.

The phrase "dry and weary land" is sometimes translated as "dry and thirsty land." But the word that some translate as "thirsty" is really "weary or faint" leading others to suggest this can also mean "exhausted land." The land is just not dry, it is also worn out. Nothing moves. Fatigue and dryness abound. So, for the psalmist, everything is worn out, bone dry, parched.

James Limburg says it well: "A human being, battered by conflict with contemporaries, can thirst for God just as intensely as parched and weary land can long for water."

Psalm 63 is also a psalm of trust. That is, the psalmist expresses hope and confidence in God, even when she feels weary or tired or thirsty. Being in need leads us to look beyond the present circumstances. We take our desires and needs to God, even if hope remains elusive. Sometimes, "hoping in hope" is all we can muster.

In the Advent season, I am reminded of two biblical characters who were "hoping in hope." Luke's gospel tells us the story of Simeon and Anna, two persons of faith who were "looking forward to the consolation of Israel" (Simeon) and "looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (Anna). Both Simeon and Anna were known presences in the temple and represent well what Limburg says faithful followers do when confronted with a period of intense spiritual dryness and weariness. "First, rather than cut himself off from the community and live in loneliness, the psalmist goes to where the worshipers are and joins in praising God (vv. 2-5). Second, he does some remembering." Thus, when Jesus' family brought him to Jerusalem to be presented to

the Lord (Luke 2:22-24), Simeon and Anna not only realized their hope, but they also gave gifts of confirmation and affirmation to Jesus' family for the life that was to follow — with its periods of dryness and abundance.

The Advent season is a reminder to us of anticipation, longing, and glimpses of realized hope. Like Simeon and Anna, when we are hungry, when we are thirsty, when we are given a glimpse of something more, we wait. We watch. Memories of the desert create longings for the oasis. And the hope we long for one day walks through the gates of the temple.

**Melanie Nogalski**

## December 4

If you read one book this Christmas, let it be Ezra Jack Keats' *The Little Drummer Boy* (music and lyrics by Katherine Davis, Henry Onorati, and Harry Simeone). Last November, Michael returned home from a trip to Barnes & Noble with a copy of this remarkable book for Patrick, confessing that he was unable to resist it when he found it among the children's holiday books. Patrick and I immediately found it irresistible, too.

We read it throughout Advent and into January. Then, Patrick continued to request it nearly every week for the past year. Why was he so taken with it? In addition to combining his favorite activities of singing and reading books, this book overflows with bright, bold, captivating illustrations. And then there are the animals—oxen, lambs, sparrows, rabbits, and roosters. As Patrick's vocabulary expanded, he began to name and comment on the pictures. Now, at almost two years old, Patrick and *The Little Drummer Boy* are old friends.

The opening pages show a little boy in blue carrying a large drum, following a crowd of exotic-looking characters wearing turbans and carrying opulent gifts: "Come, they told me (*pa rum pum pum pum*), Our finest gifts to bring..." The boy follows the parade at a distance, through barren lands.

Then we see the manger, surrounded by gifts. Reaching up from the manger is a tiny hand, fingers outstretched. ("Hand! Hand!" Patrick exclaims excitedly.) The little drummer boy stands a short distance from the manger, leaning forward as he speaks, wanting to step closer but not quite sure he should: "Baby Jesus...I am a poor boy, too." On the following page, the boy hangs his head, his eyes downcast and shoulders bent before gray skies: "I have no gift to bring...." The first time I saw these pages, they made me cry. My eyes still fill with tears whenever we reach this part of the story.

On the next page, the boy looks suddenly inspired, raising his drumsticks against a bright yellow sky: "Shall I play for you?" Mary, wearing a deep purple robe, looks down at the little drummer boy and her newborn son: "Mary nodded." ("May! May!" Patrick cries out happily, pointing at her.) I love this part of the story. I imagine Mary nodding "Yes!" to Patrick if he wanted to play for baby Jesus. And I imagine myself nodding "Yes!" to any child who wanted to play for Patrick.

The book gets even better from there. But even as the little drummer boy is poised to play, we are reminded of how it feels to witness the blossoming of hope in parched places, and to witness genuine rejoicing "with joy and singing" ...and drumming, too.

Erin Cline

## December 5

It is my last Sunday at Lake Shore, and as I reflect on all that has gone between us it seems appropriate to borrow words from one of my most favorite songs. "*Awake! Awake! And Greet the New Morn*" was sung by a dozen or more of my Lake Shore family around my hospital bed on this day five years ago when my first daughter, Anastasia, was born. We are singing this song in worship this Advent season as a congregational benediction. May it carry us, carry me through this day.

*Rejoice! Rejoice! Take heart in the night when all the world is despairing.*

Rejoice in the Lord always, and again, I say rejoice.

We held hands.

We spoke truth to each other.

We were a light for children in the midst of a dark world.

*The rising sun shall crown you with life, be strong and gentle and caring.*

We are sons and daughters of God - blessed and beloved.

I know this in my bones because of you.

You have been kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving towards me.

May the Spirit be strong in us in this hour and  
in the days to come.

*Love be our song and love our prayer, and love our endless story.*

We have sung together.

We prayed together.

We loved 'til it hurt – and it hurts even now.

But we must remember that the story goes on.

*May God fill every day we share and bring us at last in to glory.*

My spirit has born witness with your spirit.

God has been between us.

You are my saints, my cloud of witnesses.

We shall be together again.

**Rachel Sciretti**

## December 6

After Hurricane Ike struck Galveston and the first floor of our townhome was ruined, Louise and I were fortunate to rent a truly unique green stucco house that had been built in 1929. This old two-story structure happened to be situated on one of the "highest" spots on the Island, which meant the water had not even gotten into the yard. Perhaps the most striking thing about the house was a huge and very beautiful plumeria plant standing directly in front, beside the brick porch and arched entry way. We immediately fell in love with this tree and its incredible blooms. In a way, it symbolized for us the real possibility of rebirth from disaster and hope in the midst of despair.

Last February, another anomalous weather event took place along the Texas coast. An unusually brutal cold front made it all the way to the Gulf, keeping the evening temperatures well below freezing for more hours than most tropical vegetation could stand. Because our gorgeous plumeria was so large, there was simply no way for us to protect it during the night. In the morning, we discovered that all the leaves had frozen and shriveled up. They quickly fell off and the tree began to turn black, darkening first on the smaller branches and quickly spreading to the trunk. Being desperate to save it and on the advice of some native Islanders, we tried a series of radical trimmings but to no avail. After several weeks, only two major and obviously dead branches remained of the once majestic plant. With great reluctance and a heavy heart, I finally cut it down to ground level and started considering what we could find at the nursery to replace such a wonder.

As spring turned into summer and summer pointed toward fall, we stopped thinking so much about the loss of our plumeria. After events in my own professional life led me to a decision to retire, we started planning for our return to Waco. This process was not without a good deal of anxiety and a great deal of hard work. We were extremely busy, but both of us began experiencing a growing sense of anticipation as we thought about going home. Just a few days before the movers were to come to our house full of boxes, Louise made an astounding discovery. Just above the grass and apparently growing out of the dry plumeria stump was a small green shoot. I was, at first, very skeptical but upon a closer inspection confirmed that the growth had indeed originated from the woody remnant. It was simply amazing that such a thing could happen. Beyond that, the timing of this unexpected resurrection could not have been more providential. It lifted my heart at a point when I was feeling increasingly concerned about leaving my longstanding career path and uncertain about what might lie ahead. Yes, all of this may have been only a meteorological and botanical coincidence. For me, however, it became a personal symbol of encouragement, one that I had neither imagined nor anticipated but one that I sorely needed.

Some years ago after a particularly challenging period in the life of our community known as Lake Shore Baptist Church, a dear friend on the church staff gave me a framed picture which has come to speak a similar word of hope to me during subsequent periods of difficulty along my own pilgrimage. I had always displayed this image on the wall of my office and have coincidentally just now un-wrapped it. It shows the silhouette of a massive tree which has been cut down and one small shoot with a single green leaf emerging from the side. Along the bottom of an otherwise featureless trunk is what appears to be a band of moss. A closer examination reveals this moss to be a reference to Revelation 21:5. For above the flat surface of the trunk and protruding lone bloom are these words: "Behold I make all things new!" The connection with my experience in Galveston seems striking, at least to me. I will never look at a tree stump the same way and, God willing, I will never fail to be joyously surprised when I encounter something growing where I had all but given up. In this life, you can never be absolutely sure about what possibilities God still has in store. Who can know what is really coming? Who knows where life may yet spring from what seemed to be dead. In this season of Advent, it is good to remember the paradoxical yet gracious gift of blooming stumps.

**Buddy Powell**

## December 7

This year did not start well. After our daughter's long illness from lung disease, our hopes for her recovery ended with the death of our daughter, Jacquelin. That left us in the middle of a desert of despair. Was it possible to regain lost hope? Would the effort be worth the risk of failure? If so, how would we begin?

Redemption began almost before we were aware. Our personal and church families responded with divine love. Her colleagues gave their all to hold us up to Christ. The memorial service is one we will carry in our hearts forever.

As we turned our attention to her home to do that which was needed, the terrible pain was everywhere. It became clear that to that escape from that desert we needed to understand more about the everyday life our daughter.

It seems creating life's path is not unlike one would design a stained glass window. One piece at a time. Some colors may not always harmonize, but overall the facets produce many different hues, like those in a rainbow. Aware that all colors in a window may not be perfect, we understand her colors did not make her a saint.

We learned most of what we sought to understand from others whose lives Jacque had touched. We received almost three hundred letters, cards, and more telephone messages than we could count. That support continues today.

Having said that, however, some very interesting threads of truth were woven throughout her short life. One important thread was explained by her colleagues. Being as intelligent as she was, at times Jacque would be invited to enter into ongoing and tough discussions. She was always eager to contribute her views without a pious attitude.

The strongest thread was expressed over and over: her care for others. Somehow Jacque was able to demonstrate by her actions that if you needed help, she was available. She would give her all and stay the course until you were ready again to carry your load. No matter your rank in life, all were included, and when it was over you knew she loved you.

Simple trivial matters meant nothing to her. Learning that helped me to understand why, in a driving rain, when the sky-lite leaked a bit, she simply put the same blanket down on the floor that she had used the last time it rained.

What finally gave us some joy and relief is to know all who responded to us knew that Jacque loved them as Christ loved her. We are inspired by these words, "To live in the hearts of those you loved means you will never die." Thanks be to God.

**Bruce Neatherlin**

## December 8

She was the keeper of the family memory. Together, she and the girl would walk the cemetery. She knew where the graves were, who put up the stone tributes, who lay on the merchant's side and which ones lay on the mill-village side; who was educated; which ones fought in wars; and how their families survived while the men were gone. She honored some, pitied some, and expressed great sadness about others -- a brother, who died at the age of 12 of gangrene, a father who died at 40 from a stroke. She knew the family stories about the children who went to work in the cotton mill at age 10; about those abused by husbands and fathers; how they became brain damaged, body damaged, or soul damaged.

She shared the stories as she and the girl walked the carriage width lanes that divided the cemetery, carefully teaching respect for the dead by not walking on the graves, teaching the subtleties of class distinction based on where the rich were buried and where the poor lay. She shared a wealth of memory with the child. Here's where your great-great grandmother lies. She had twelve children; all went to work in the cotton mills. Here's your great grandfather; see his tombstone bears the Confederate Cross in its carving. Here is your grandmother, when she was a child they dressed her as a boy so Sherman's troops wouldn't bother her as they marched to Georgia. Here lies the chosen one, the red-headed, talented one, who wasted the opportunity of an education and whose daddy's money ran through his fingers like water. Good people, mean people, hard-working and lazy people -- the memories of a family.

However, our family's past was not the focus of her attention. She was very focused on the present and the living. In some ways my mother was predictable. She was spontaneously generous, like the woman who poured out a jar of costly perfume onto the feet of Jesus. Momma quite literally would give away the shirt off her back if Daddy would have let her.

She loved without reservation. She loved all things bright and beautiful. She loved the early spring. She loved flowers and babies and birds and squirrels and kids and old people and saints and sinners -- lavishly, extravagantly, and loyally.

I think of a time when we had a very bleak, cold winter. Snow had fallen for three Wednesdays in a row and after each snow a sheet of ice blanketed the top. We made my mother go sledding with us. Down the hill she rushed, usually tumbling out at the bottom of the hill. She finally got too tired to walk back to the top and slumped on an old tree stump.

As I sled back down the hill again, aiming directly for my mom, a snow ridge pitched the sled sideways and I tumbled out at her feet. She laughed and clapped her hands and said, "Look what you uncovered with your tumble!" There, in a cleared space under the mounds of dirt was a small flower buried under the snow and ice, just waiting to lift up its head. She said, "Ah, thank goodness.... spring can't be far away."

I rejoice in the memory of my mom and her joy at finding the signs of spring.

**Libby Bellinger**

## December 9

In May of 1997 Kerry and I set out in a motor home to see the west. We had no deadlines or routes in mind, but decided we wanted to see as many national parks as we could in three months. The Painted Desert and the Grand Canyon were among our first stops before we headed north to Utah.

Mid-May found us in Monument Valley, one of the most photographed parks in the United States. The next day we were in Natural Bridges National Park, followed by a drive through the Canyonlands and tall views of the Colorado River. Two days later we trekked through Arches National Park and marveled at the delicate formations created by wind and water erosion on the red sandstone.

If you have not been to Utah, it is a beautiful state in an arid, isolated kind of way. Towns and people are few, and I'm sure we saw many more tourists than natives. The beauty of Utah is more stark than lush, more isolated than populated, and more red than brown. This is largely due to the geological history of the area which begins somewhere in the Cretaceous period and Cenozoic era and proved to be a lot more fascinating to Kerry than to me.

On the afternoon of May 22 we pulled into Bryce Canyon National Park and found a spot for our motor home. We then proceeded to walk to the edge of the canyon. Nothing could have prepared me for the sense of awe that arose in my chest when I first glimpsed the raw and whimsical vista in front of me.

Bryce Canyon is actually an amphitheater instead of a canyon, but at that moment I had little use for logic or learning. I was stunned by the appearance of a twenty-mile wide valley filled with columns in varying shades of red, orange and white. These columns, known as "hoodoos," rise 200 feet from the floor of the theater, and look like nothing less than a child's version of a sand castle birthday cake.

I know that prayers of wonder and thanksgiving rose to my throat, and I hope I expressed some of them aloud. What a playful God! How long did this lump-in-the-throat view exist before seen by any human eye? To wander down along the canyon floor in no way diminished my reverence for this playground of land.

Nearly ten years later we were able to travel with our dear friends, Van and Ibby, to see Utah again. As we approached the rim of Bryce Canyon, I was more excited to see the astonishment on their face than I was to see the view again for myself. I think God is like this: He creates wonderful and amazing things and sets them in the middle of a dry desert. Then, occasionally people come to the place and are reminded of His revealing and playful imagination and the power that He is. And then, best of all, he must be thrilled when others of His children bring more of His children to the altar.

## December 10

*"I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth!  
Do you not perceive it?" - Isaiah 43:19*

Coming home, I came to expect Ruby there. Hunched over, digging in the dirt, faded flower-print cotton nightgown hanging from her shoulders, she would peek out from under her brightly colored hat. She squinted through big, dark glasses with bright red plastic rims. "Chris? Is that you? Katie?" she would say loudly with a slightly nervous smile. She loved to give me a firm handshake with her cold, soft hand, holding my elbow with her free hand. Sometimes she wanted to share a story or two, or ask me a few questions. Often she would pull me towards her little hedged-in garden, to show me the purple bachelor buttons, red zinnias, or pink roses. She loved to gently touch the flowers and point out the new blossoms.

It became difficult to make it down the sidewalk undetected when I came home each night. If we did make it upstairs, or if Ruby was not outside, our first steps in our second-story apartment were usually followed by a phone call, or a banging we could hear coming up through our floor. "This is 105. Would you like to share a bowl of popcorn?" "Um, sure." "Well, wait a few minutes, then come on down. I'll hit the ceiling with the broom when it's ready." Click. Ruby shared not only flowers and popcorn, but her casseroles and desserts, stories and spare trinkets.

In a time when Waco seemed to us like a wilderness, a place that was dry and prickly and desolate, before we had found Lake Shore in the middle of a Water series, we found Ruby. Every morning, every afternoon, she searched the soil and the shoots with her fingertips for new buds, gently tracing the plants for new blossoms. She could usually see things before I could, in places I would never think to look. When she found something new, she would stop and treasure it, holding it in her fingers. Her face would open with a wide smile and she would glow. Her sparkling and squinting eyes seemed to say: "Here is the new thing! Do you not perceive it?"

**Chris Brennan Homiak**

## December 11

Poised on the edge of the hollow, the pines and blackjack oaks spread out before me. I sit on a bench that once was a swing. No longer supported in its cradle, but firmly in place on cinder blocks, it offers its presence as a place to linger, to let the expanse unfold in front of anyone who spends even a moment there. To the right is an old pine snag bearing witness to a bird of wonder. The huge square holes are telltale of visits in the not so distant past of something big, motored by wings. The bird which works in this way searched for a favorite food, carpenter ants.

Though I have never seen, and will likely never see, a Lord-to-God bird, this relative holds as much fascination for me. I wonder if it should have some similar epithet, perhaps the Prince-of-the-Pines? Its voice is not melodic, yet distinctive. I have seen these birds many times. However, it is not necessary to see this bird in order to know it is out there.

The last few years have seen reports of the Lord-to-God bird as still being alive and hiding in deep, old growth, and largely inaccessible swamp forests. Is it possible? Most people who have claimed to have seen it probably have seen its relative instead.

Upon this bench I sit in quiet repose as the evening sets in. It will be a clear autumn night with a harvest moon. Still while light remains, I wait and listen. Then, there, I hear it, the southern song, a call in the conifers, the accelerating “wuk-wuk-wuk-kuk” of the Pileated Woodpecker. Another answers. One more behind me joins in refrain. With this many around me one hopes of a viewing. But no, the call is made on the move. If ever there was a chance, it faded with the setting of the sun.

I care not to see it suffer a similar fate as the Ivory-Billed Woodpecker. Perhaps it has a better chance, having adapted to many different forests and even to the encroachment of man. Excessive logging can and did take its toll, though. Wisdom, brought on by the disappearance of the Ivory Bill and many other species, cautions us to be mindful and vigilant of our deeds. Mankind must factor in the consequence of his actions not only for his own kind but for the birds of the sky and the fish of the sea, the every thing that crawls on the earth. It is not enough to say that there are many, even thousands around. Remember the Carolina Parakeet? Thousands blackened the skies all along the eastern US, and now there are none.

Upon this bench I sit and wait, listening, rejoicing. I want to hear the southern song all the rest of my days. I want my children to hear it too, even when I am gone.

**Roy Smallwood**

## December 12

Near the end of first Isaiah, just before launching into his narrative of King Hezekiah, Isaiah offers an oracle of judgment and hope. Isaiah 35 itself focuses on hope with descriptions of God's restoration of broken people and a barren land—a returning of the cosmos to its rightful order. To tell this story of hope, Isaiah incorporates ideas from Israel's exodus, effectively reminding his audience of God's faithfulness in the past in order to assure them of future deliverance. In this "new exodus" God will once again make a "way" in the wilderness for the people so that they may worship their Deliverer. The Gospel writers also incorporate these exodus images into their stories about Jesus to communicate the restoration he brings.

In Mark 7:31-37 and 8:22-27 the Gospel writer offers two rather remarkable, and strikingly similar, healing stories. The first focuses on a "deaf man who had an impediment to his speech" (7:32), while the second centers on a blind man. In these unusual stories, Jesus enacts the promises of Isa 35:5-6. In Mark 7, Jesus literally "unstops" the deaf man's ears by putting his fingers in them and loosens his tongue with a touch. After this healing, the crowd responds to Jesus by saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak" (7:37). In this verse, the crowd echoes Isaiah's proclamation that with the coming of the Lord, "the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy." This allusion is even clearer when we read the Greek translation of the Old Testament which reads, "the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the mute will hear, . . . and the tongue of the one with a speech impediment will speak clearly." By establishing Isaiah 35 as the context for Jesus' healing ministry in Mark 7, the Gospel writer effectively brings it to mind for his readers again in chapter 8 with Jesus' healing of the blind man. In this way, Mark declares to his ancient readers that with the coming of Jesus is the coming of hope, the long-anticipated restoration of humanity and the cosmos.

As we live in this advent time, we too are waiting—walking through what can seem to be a barren wilderness and looking toward restoration. With these stories that bring the exodus, Isaiah, and Jesus together, we see God's will for wholeness among people and the world. Recalling these stories can give us strength as we walk forward in the wilderness, hopeful for the blooming crocus and the wholeness the Lord's coming brings.

Alicia Myers

## December 13

“If She Were My Child”

The shrill, agonizing, little voice rings in my head still;  
The pain in her little innocent face accuses me still.  
They say her right foot will be amputated tomorrow;  
today, my heart is sinking in sorrow.  
I read my Bible and pray,  
the shrill, little voice still ringing in my head.

The baby’s mother was sitting beside her, both hungry still,  
her malnourished breast as good as expired pill,  
the baby wailed from pain and hunger:  
as her mother explained, there has hardly been laughter  
since they fled the war, where the baby was shot in the leg.  
Right here, in this dusty wasteland, they fight another war:  
hopelessness.

Disorientation, amputation, a grief prolonged.  
I read my Bible again, prayed, and longed.  
I went to the gym and exercised,  
wrote a song of my grief but could not sing,  
in my head the shrill, little voice still ringing,

Tomorrow her leg would be amputated.  
I will read my Bible again and I will pray again;  
I will go to the gym and exercise;  
I will write another song of my grief;  
in my head her shrill, little voice will ring;  
Her leg will be amputated:  
the world will lose no sleep.  
I wonder what I would do if she were my child.

*Dedicated to a little, nameless, girl in Darfur whose story is told here.*

**David Tonghou Ngong**

## December 14

My hands look wearied, weathered. The wrinkles marking the joints of my fingers are white; my nails are picked at; my skin is rough. These months have felt rough. The pain and sorrow of being merely human threatened to leave my spirit as wearied as the hands I've wrung in fear, in isolation, in anticipation. I am no gardener. I try, but I kill things. To me the most poignant image of something rising out of nothing, of hopes realized, is the making of bread.

I look down at the mixing bowl, and the ingredients spread before me. And I look at my hands. Clean in preparation; the only soap in the kitchen is dish soap—extra dense and sudsy (strong enough for the remnants of a crusty casserole)—and the scent lingers on my fingertips. As I survey the flour, salt, eggs, and review the recipe, I am reminded of the size of our kitchen (small) and the amount of counter-space (nominal). I have never made bread before, not real bread. Not without youth to my credit, and the help of a mother or grandmother. Baking, however, runs in the length of these fingers. More and more the youth is undeniably leaving my hands, the strength and maturity of adulthood showing itself in the veins and lines. I look down the length of my slim fingers, with trimmed and painted nails, and I see my mother's hands. My mother who baked. I have learned that baking means sharing. I delight in creating things from scratch—using only a fork and a spatula as my tools. The recipients' smiles make the hard work worthwhile. It is not domestication; it is sharing. Though I have dabbled in cakes and brownies, bread remains uncharted territory. Not true bread. Banana bread; breads out of a box; muffins—those I have made. But today will be real bread.

I look down at my hands. They are clean. They are weathered. The cold, windy Texas winter has left them hardened and rough. Inside we hide from the wind but only barely escape the chill. I can see the peaks of my hands that serve as the first shield from the deafening wind. I can see the folds of skin in between my fingers—especially that tender spot between the thumb and forefinger—intended to be protected, yet white and cracked from neglect. These are the hands, and these are the ingredients. I am going to make bread. The months have been long, but I will create. For me this is theological. I have lost my center, and must remember what theology is, what *life* is. The ingredients spread before me, the promise of the product, the sharing—this is salvific; this is redemptive. This is sharing.

For all my worrying, the dough is finished, quicker and easier than I thought. The ingredients mixed together, and I followed directions. Rolling up my sleeves, I turned the dough over, kneading and folding. The hardest part was washing my hands after I had set the dough aside. The bits of dough clung to my under-moisturized fingers, flour mixing with cuticles, both melt off in the steaming water. Yet I still

scrub, washing clean the promise—the hope—of something yet to come. The rising took twice as long as the words told me. Patience and nerves watched, worried that I would have dense, flat *challah* to present to friends awaiting something appearing more like real bread. (And I also think what a great sermon title ‘unintentionally unleavened’ would be.) The dough beat out my patience, eventually rising. I split the dough, braided the three pieces, and baked it. Despite the temperamental oven, the result exceeded expectations—golden, warm, perfect. I watched my hands nervously check the ingredients; watched them measure and stir, knead and fold. I watched them braid and bake. These hands slice and share.

Though based on the Eucharist, perhaps a sacrament more attuned to the Passion narratives of another Christmas season, the anticipation of the world born anew at the death and resurrection, persists even at the waiting for the child to come; the star rising, the flower breaking through, the bread of life proofing, rising, baking, giving life. We were meant to create and combine ingredients, to take food and share it. It is life. Bread is life.

**Meredith Holladay**

## December 15

"I Can Still Taste the Berries"

In this mystery zone  
Where all else fails  
Where I meet no end  
Where what I want  
is not what I want

Or

where I want to go  
is led astray  
a canvas  
left white...  
where I belong is a  
Constant  
Question?  
Once I heard Confucius say...  
"where ever you may go, go  
with all your heart"  
but where in the mystery zone  
is all of your heart?

What will let me go?  
not even  
Love  
can lead me  
out yet...

and as I awake  
from the dark,  
I give my self up  
to the doubt  
that is God  
and I pray...

for it is all I can do Now

and here comes  
dawn  
a bright sun  
trying to pierce  
through the grey  
as if grasping  
for more air

I relate

sitting  
on the edge  
to this summer sun  
leaking  
like a tedious faucet  
in the middle of  
the night

drops of gold  
falling fast  
Onto the ground  
Life  
in the sink

To sit up  
is a strain  
But  
I can...still  
so I am  
reminded  
of the person  
inside  
yelling RISE!  
or die down

Eat  
draw with  
basic instinct  
food,  
the first hue  
of your resistance  
keeping the body  
in simple means  
of encouragement

Means  
that I can  
taste still  
its colors  
a freshness  
inevitable  
to ignore  
even with the grief  
I...can...still...taste  
the berries...  
Amen

Louise-Marie Morin

## December 16

Rejoicing is hard for me. For much of my life, I have too easily remembered my problems, my struggles, my chains, and my pain. It is hard for me to see and absorb my many blessings; I must make a conscious effort to remember and appreciate them. It is easy to be visited by the dark, and it is harder to recall the light. This past year was hard; I lost a job that I loved on April 30th (I had worked with a local juvenile crime prevention project for more than eight years), and I was unemployed for four months. The Texas unemployment compensation system and the generosity of family kept me afloat, but surprisingly, I was not immersed in wretched discouragement. I had some faith that things would work out, and as I write these words, I remember Dorisanne's October sermon emphasizing that sometimes, just a little bit of faith can be enough—a good thing, for my faith was larger than a mustard seed but not substantially greater.

Miraculously, the wheel turned and the wind began blowing at my back instead of in my face. I was given the opportunity to teach three National Government classes at MCC; two of the classes are “dual credit” where I teach high school honor students at area high schools, and I can scarcely believe my good fortune! Yes, I have an advanced college degree in Political Science and have much political knowledge, but before September, I had never taught any class and was not even sure that I could. I accepted the job offer because I needed money and employment to survive, but I accepted the job for one other reason. I knew that I wanted to be a teacher and I knew that I would teach for free if necessary or even pay some organization for the opportunity to teach. So I started teaching, six lectures a week, each lecture seventy five minutes long - each lecture lovingly and painstakingly prepared after a careful reading of the textbook, bolstered by unusual and informative reference material.

In the initial days of teaching, I was afraid - I wasn't sure I could do this. I had never taught before. I had rarely spoken in public. I had no “Toastmasters” or high school debate experience. But I had one conviction and one truth. I knew that God would give me strength and I knew that God would not let me fall. So I kept teaching, and discovered something important. I really am a good public speaker! At times, I amazed myself with my previously undiscovered speaking skill; it was like carving priceless sculptural masterpieces again and again and again. To have an entranced audience in the palm of your hands is among the greatest of human blessings, a fundamentally total experience of balance and truth that is blessed by the gods. (I use “gods” in plural sense to emphasize the exhilaration of my epiphany.) At times, speaking from an ordinary lectern of wood, I feel myself being carried to a NEW reality, something unimaginably great, a place that I have only rarely experienced. And on the inside of my soul, I

weep with happiness, with joy, with thanksgiving, and yes, with rejoicing.

“The crocus in the desert signals the presence and power of God, so those who are weary and fearful can take heart” . . . “new life in the wilderness, the blossoming of hope.”. Yeah, Isaiah was right. I've been there. I have lived those realities recently.

As I write, much of the MCC fall semester is gone. Six weeks left with some 30+ more opportunities remaining to hold something great in the palm of my hand and in the depths of my heart as I stand behind an old wooden lectern. And I give thanks, more thanks, because today I learned that I will teach three National Government classes for MCC during the spring semester! What a privilege! What a gift! But even though there is power, strength, and healing in the “teaching zone,” teaching and public speaking still don't come easily for me. Each teaching day, I call on God to give me strength to pass along the wonders of knowledge to others. The irresistible urge to rejoice does not rumble and tumble through me during every lecture, but it happens enough times for me to roar to myself, “Thanks be to God! REJOICE!”

**John DeVries**

## December 17

Each morning as I sit on my porch to read and pray and write I rejoice at the good fortune that has brought me to this place in time. I remember that I am who I am because of those who came before me.

My father, Paul Bowen, was born in Mosheim, Texas, in 1914, one of 10 children. He moved from a farm to Waco in his teen years. He spent a great deal of time trying to get back to the country. In 1968 he bought a piece of property in Mart, just outside of Waco. A portion of that farm land would eventually be handed down to me. He was raised Methodist but fell in love with Dorothy Brown, a Catholic. His mother, Caroline Bowen, embraced my mother with open arms. This was considered a "mixed marriage" in 1939, and they were not allowed to marry in the church. The ceremony took place in the priest's office. My dad was a very spiritual man long before it was considered acceptable. He was a member of the St. Vincent DePaul Society that would eventually become Caritas here in Waco. He became Catholic and attended daily Mass for much of his life.

My mother, Dorothy Brown, was born here in Waco in 1919, to another "mixed marriage" couple. Her parents were Douglas and Clarabelle Brown. My maternal grandmother was born in a small town in Tennessee and was raised Methodist. Her family strongly disapproved of her marriage to a Catholic. I cannot imagine the courage it took for her to move away from home and come to Waco in 1915. The KKK was very powerful here in Waco at that time. My grandmother became Catholic and together she and my grandfather raised nine children during the depression. My grandparents' strong faith was passed on to each of their children. I remember my mom always knelt beside the bed at night to say her prayers. She taught us to pray together as a family. Dorothy was a longtime member of the Catholic Study Club founded in 1913, as was my grandmother. She was also a volunteer at Providence Hospital for many years.

I owe so much to these people. I learned courage, generosity, love of family, hospitality, service to my community, and a lifelong commitment to learning and growing in my faith. As I sit on my porch and remember that I am who I am because of these people who influenced me, I feel "like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing".

**Patty Field**

## December 18

I was told *where* we were going, but I did not believe it with the *way* we were going. It took several minutes by subways, trolleys, and walking to get to from one destination to the next, and the farther we got, the more the city of Philadelphia around us seemed forgotten. The neighborhood was desolate, a place where grocery stores did not exist. Buildings were abandoned. Homes were left to deteriorate. Trash was piled on the streets. The last bit of grass I saw was a small park at the stop where we exited the bus. Whatever remnant of life that was there became barely visible.

As we walked even farther to get to our destination, I started to question our guides to check whether they had made a mistake and were taking us to the wrong place. I could only think to myself, "How could a garden exist in such a lifeless place and continue year after year feeding this community?"

We turned a sharp corner in between a row of empty storefronts with graffiti covered plywood over the windows and houses that had started to fall from their own weight. And, there it stood -- a garden in the most forgotten part of the city.

An eight-foot tall chain linked fence with barbed wire on the top might have surrounded the plot of land, but it held life. The garden took up at least one city block and housed 50 or so small plots, so each family could have one. Every inch of land that had been salvaged from a rundown dry cleaning shop was used to symbolize hope. The sunflowers grew over the fence top as if to spread whatever joy they brought to those walking along the street. There were colorful flowers and trees surrounding the gazebo that sat in the middle. Bright blue benches lined the paths that connected the variety of vegetables. It was easy to forget we were in Philadelphia until we glanced outside the fence.



A place that seemed so barren, so deprived of soil and green space, held at its core a place of life. This garden was not the end-all answer to the neighborhood or the food crisis within its city. It was what it was, a place to see the possibilities. It was a place to experience new life and how that can transform a dreary existence into a blossoming of hope.

For me that is the essence of Advent. The birth of Christ is not an acknowledgement that the world's problems are solved; rather it is a proclamation that our society has the choice to do things differently.

**Charles Conkin**

## December 19

The safety and friendship of a mother's love, gradually changing, gradually deteriorating. Why was she interfering? A failure to understand what was happening. My own expectation that a small child should take on the responsibility of the world. The tensions of sibling rivalry and finally a feeling of abandonment by age twenty-six – lasting for decades. Feelings of having God taken from me, little by little, until it seemed the distance between God and me was too wide to bridge. Trust gone. Hurt parading as anger – anger leading to a pushing-away of anyone daring to love me. Years of trying to drown the hurt. A lifetime of only answering my own questions, afraid to look past the lies I told myself that others had told me. Believing them even after they'd stopped telling the lies. Constantly attempting to be who I thought others wanted me to be – resentful that I felt the need to be other than me. Not sure who that was.

Suddenly (finally?), the voices of women beckoning me to come back. Gradually, the voices of men assuring me I wouldn't be hurt again. A loving God reminding me he'd always held me in His arms. A chorus of souls inviting me to join them in expectant waiting. "He's coming," they said. "Stay with us and see." Deciding to stay, at least for a while.

The healing power of God accepted. The love of a mother finally acknowledged – it had never gone. Where had I been? Who had I been? No abandonment – a sister returned. God doing for me what I apparently couldn't do for myself. The gulf between my perception of God's distance from me reduced to the width of a single hair. Hurt diminished, anger subsiding. New growth bursting forth from seemingly dead wood.

"He's coming," they said again. "It's Advent. Stay with us and see." Deciding to stay. Deciding to see.

**Benjamin Eakin**

## December 20

This summer—after a year that involved many vocational challenges for both of us, including the sadness that is part and parcel of my new job as a hospice chaplain—I found myself feeling weighed down. I was leaning to the sorrow side, struggling against a darkness that loomed large. Everywhere I looked, my eyes landed on something that made me sad.

I talked to friends who listened well, which soothed some of the sadness, but no amount of talking seemed to straighten me back up. I was still leaning.

In a conversation with my chaplain colleague, Jaime, I moaned: “There’s just so much sorrow. I need a big dose of joy!” And then, in a moment of inspiration, proclaimed: “I need some Olivia time!” And Jaime—who had nobly negotiated a year of juggling an infant daughter and a demanding job—replied: “Oh, and I need some time without Olivia!”

It was a match made in heaven.

Each Friday afternoon, she delivered the baby and her diaper bag, and I ended my week with some “O-Time,” allowing whatever came into that curious young mind to determine my response. We stacked plastic containers, “organized” CDs, laughed at the dog, and learned how to go up—then down, then up—the stairs. And if Olivia began to rub her eyes, I scooped her up, headed for the bedroom, and we both took a nap.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from a Nazi prison: “Precisely at the time when one is having rather hard personal experiences, one can ensure that the real joys of life keep their due proportions.”

O-Time is my “due proportion.” She has been pure joy, though her dad once heard me say that and suggested I wasn’t seeing her at the right time of day.

No, she isn’t perfect, but before she started crawling, she came mighty close. Still, she is a healing balm for my splintered soul, light in a sometimes dark world. She gives me an attitude adjustment—leaning me back toward joy.

She reminds me again why God came as a baby.

**Judy Prather**

## December 21

Not being much of a nocturnal creature, I could have missed it my entire life. But a dear friend called me in the middle of the night and said “Wake up and get dressed and come on over! You’ve GOT to see this!” It was a work/school night, and my sleep was deep and sound, and it didn’t make any sense at all, so I believe it must have been the Holy Spirit that moved me.

Tradition has it that you mustn’t gaze upon the Night-Blooming Cereus alone. A precious few are fortunate enough to gaze upon it at all, because this desert-dwelling plant, a.k.a. the Queen of the Night, only blooms once a year, and then only in the middle of the night. The exquisite flower begins to tease its eager watchers some time before midnight, and slowly, slowly opens into an enormous white wonder and emits a soft, sweet fragrance. This Queen of the Night holds forth in silent splendor for four or five hours, and by the time the morning light has come, she is gone.

So how do you know when this night of miracles will happen? You *don’t*. Oh there are signs ... a pod appears – or several – and swells with each passing day. In some years, however, my lack of vigilance has resulted in my sleeping right through the night of blooming. After several years I began to notice that the day before she blooms, the tip of the pod becomes white, so that is when I choose: with whom will I share my treasure this year? Not every friend would appreciate being called in the middle of the night and being told to come and look at a flower.



The morning after, and the rest of the year, she is a gangly, spindly, unattractive plant that would certainly be overlooked by a hiker in the Chihuahuan desert. Anyone coming to my front porch might wonder at the ugly, dead-looking thing taking over the corner. *Little do they know*, that this is my metaphor for joy – for rejoicing.

*Yet in thy dark streets shineth . . .*

*A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse . . .*

*Why lies he in such mean estate?*

*He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.*

*Rejoice, for unto you is born this night . . .*

**Jo Pendleton**

## December 22

I am always a little embarrassed at the beginning. Such vulnerability demands it. We exchange a few awkward words of greeting and then the routine instruction—lay all of your stuff in the other room, undress to your comfort level, and tell me when you are ready for me to come in. I lay face-down, bare and powerless, and ask a stranger to hold my hurt.

She lays her hands on my shoulders. We stay on the surface of things awhile; talk of holiday plans and weather conditions. It takes time to realize I don't need to talk, to breathe deeply enough that her fingers can get to the pain.

Inhale. Exhale. Kneading. Kneading. Inhale. Exhale. Deeper still.

We work together: I let go and the muscles of my body unwind that she may touch the deepest parts of my pain. The world quiets. Tears come as she touches the anxiety in my neck, the sore in my back, the strain in my calves. I didn't know it was there. And there I'm holding my fear...and there some anger, and there is my control.

Is it pain or pleasure? At first touch you're not sure, but you push against the hand pressing you and feel the strain. And then comes release. And I remember—I have been here before. But I've forgotten what wholeness feels like. I've walked numb for so long, so used to pain.

Today I find the courage to say, I need you to touch me. I need to feel your skin against my skin. To share your tears and hear your laughter. I need to know that you are human too, and for your wounded hands to offer their warmth and healing.

Touch me, God in Jesus. Our lives are in your hands. Let the body of Christ rejoice today.

*"But we hold this treasure in jars of clay."*

**Jaime McGlothlin**

## December 23

Visiting time was almost over when a family rushed into the intensive care waiting room at Brackenridge Hospital. One young woman pushed a baby in a stroller; the other led her father through the maze of chair legs. He tapped his cane until he found a place to sit. The first woman placed the baby wrapped in a pink blanket in the cradle of the grandfather's arms and handed him a bottle. The other positioned the stroller next to his feet, and, with a flurry of fingers, spelled a message into his hands. Then they both rushed into ICU for the last chance to visit that night.

The baby was an armful for anyone, chunky and old enough to wiggle out of the man's arms. He rocked and swayed and patted and soothed her. He performed his tasks with such tenderness and skill that if I had not seen the sign language or the collapsible cane, I may not have guessed that the man across the room from me was both deaf and blind.

At 9:30 the women returned. They tucked the baby into the stroller, then focused on their father.

"Jun—ior," one said, as she enunciated each syllable loudly while spelling into her father's hands. "Jun—ior open eyes... little bit." As she spoke and spelled, her sister touched his eyes a "little bit."

"Jun—ior," said the first, "Jun—ior move fingers . . . little bit." As she spoke with her voice and fingers, her sister reached for the father's hand and moved his fingers back and forth.

"Jun—ior," she continued, "Jun—ior turn head . . . little bit . . . to us," and her sister turned the ears that could not hear and the eyes that could not see a "little bit" toward the daughters' voices.

I could see the small signs of relief on the man's face. But there was more to this report. "To - morrow," said the storyteller, "to - morrow Jun—ior open eyes MORE." Her fingers were emphatic about this. Her sister raised one of her father's eyelids, then the other.

"To - mor - row" she said, "to - mor - row Jun—ior move fingers MORE." She almost shouted the news into his hands! Her sister moved her hand from her father's fingers to his elbow and pumped his forearm up and down.

"To - mor - row," she said, "to - mor - row Jun—ior hear us MORE." Her sister placed her hands behind her father's right ear and kissed it, then turned his head to place a kiss on his left ear.

As they pushed the baby toward the door, followed by their father, tapping his cane, I heard them say, "Tomorrow."

Tomorrow, Isaiah said: *“The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. . . everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”*

Tomorrow, indeed.

**Sharlande Sledge**

## December 24

Being a Girl Scout was a good thing for me. It was good to belong, good to earn badges, and good to find out more about myself in relationship to others. One of my simple projects was to plant a crocus bulb in the backyard to learn something about its cycle of growth, and, perhaps, to gain some small understanding about the various seasons of life.

Each year, as winter was waning, my mother would look longingly at the flowerbed alongside the back porch for the first signs of the bright yellow blooms of my crocus. And bravely, it would poke its head through the snow to trumpet the certainty of spring.

There was a sweet, almost childlike, joy in mother's welcome of my crocus. And in a relationship that was sometimes fraught with pain and confusion, this seasonal sharing was redemptive and pure.

Of all the mysterious names of God revealing aspects of the transforming power of God's love, "Redeemer" is one I cherish for so many reasons. Our Redeemer, unhindered by time and space, can reach us wherever we are in life and bring meaning, hope, and even joy out of sorrow. The redemption we experience can free us to forgive and see with new eyes, our hearts no longer held captive and closed, but overflowing with gratitude.

O Radiant Redeemer,  
Who shines away the darkness,  
and blooms within the desert  
of our barren world and parched souls,

Whose mercies make new  
each moment of our lives  
with hope and purpose,

let us flower with your love  
and peace and justice and compassion  
that our lives may reflect your incarnation.

And on this holy, starlit night,  
let us rejoice in your advent with the angels  
and lift up our heads to see,  
again and always,  
your redemption drawing nigh.

Amen.

**Deborah Harris**

## Christmas Day

*In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup>This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup>All went to their own towns to be registered. <sup>4</sup>Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. <sup>5</sup>He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup>While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. <sup>7</sup>And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

*<sup>8</sup>In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup>Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup>But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: <sup>11</sup>to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup>This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' <sup>13</sup>And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, <sup>14</sup>'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'*

*<sup>15</sup>When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' <sup>16</sup>So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup>When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; <sup>18</sup>and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.*

**Luke 2:1-18**

Advent 2010

Lake Shore Baptist  
Church



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