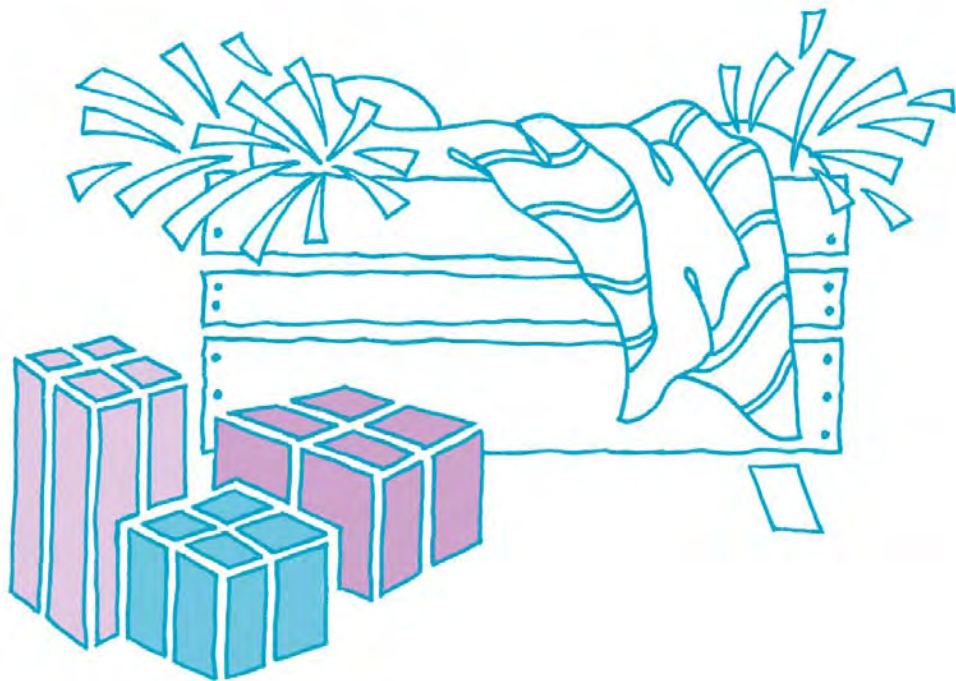
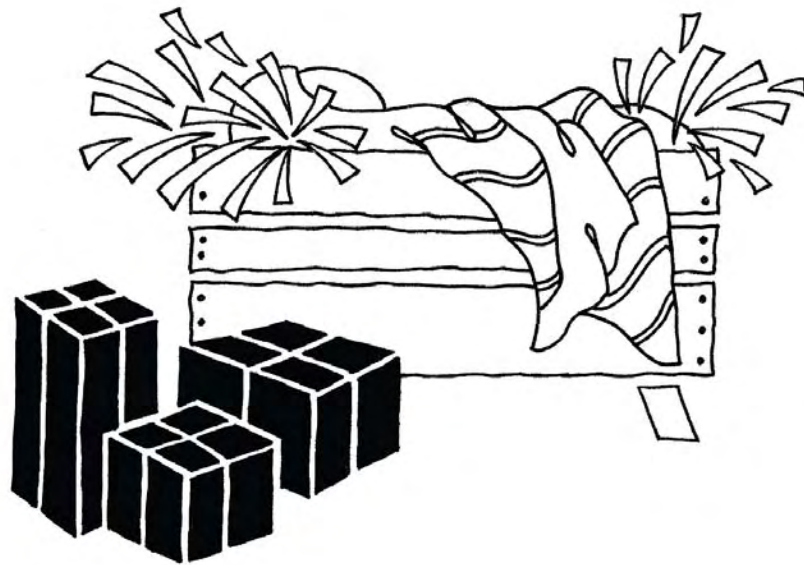


# SIMPLE GIFTS



# SIMPLE GIFTS



*cover art by Pam Allen*

## “Simple Gifts”

In a world with layers of activity, commitments, and needs, we long to know what it means to live with spiritual focus and intention, a longing that is particularly acute during the Advent season. We want to tend the gifts God has given us and bless the gifts of others. We wonder how our lives can become expressions of the Incarnation.

This year we offer you a booklet of meditations by Lake Shore members who have spent time this fall reflecting on the theme “Simple Gifts.” As you read their words, we invite you to consider the questions that guided their writing:

*What gift (tangible or intangible), perhaps simple in the eyes of the world, is full of extravagant meaning for you?*

*Who has been an example to you of God’s call to gracefully give (or receive) a gift?*

*When you remember the seasons of Advent and Christmas, what gift has made a lasting impression on you?*

*When you think of the gifts that came into the world through the birth of the Christ-child, which one has taken on new life and spirit for you this year?*

*As you think back over all the Christmases of your life, what have you learned about the gifts that matter most?*

*What is your prayer for this complex world? What gift does the world need?*

These questions are as relevant today as they were when we first focused on “Simple Gifts” twenty-two years ago. As we re-visit the theme this year, may this meditation from that year’s booklet, written by our beloved friend, sister in Christ, and companion on the journey Jan Williams, fill us with gratitude for each gift that is ours to give and to receive.

*One day I mentioned a “minor” miracle to my daughter, Lynn. She pointed out to me that there were no “minor” miracles. I feel that way about gifts. In trying to sort out what a simple gift is, I discovered that, for me at least, there is no such thing.*

*A great blue heron standing like a sentinel in the top of the tallest tree around the pond, the breathtaking majesty of the moon and Venus almost touching (or so it seemed), the quiet smile from a friend who understands the pressure I’ve been under, the awareness of the gift of God’s love in a child born long ago—they are all of a piece—a pattern of “giftiness” that makes even the tragedies of life enduring and productive.*

*I pray for heightened awareness of the goodness of God in all gifts and for gratitude for every creature, human or otherwise, that strengthens that awareness.*

## November 27

I found myself this past summer—not that I was any more lost than usual, but I found a part of myself that I hadn't seen in a long time. Let me explain.

My grandparents' dining room table has been taking up space in our little-used dining room since we moved to Waco. An antique by virtue of its age, the table has no particular beauty. It's very simple, with straight, clean lines. The legs are somewhat unique in that there are six of them rather than four, two in the middle connected to the legs on either end by an arched piece of wood. I won't even venture a guess as to what type of wood(s) it is. Adding to its charm are a deep scratch that Gary always said was from a worm and gave it character – neither of which is true – and the fact that my grandmother shellacked it at some point, presumably to protect it. Quirks, scratches, worms, shellacking and all, I love the table.

So, this miserably hot, dry summer, I decided to stay indoors and refinish the table. It's been years since I've refinished furniture, and I had forgotten how therapeutic I find the process—peeling, scraping, removing layer after layer of finish and stain and stain and finish; sanding by hand with steel wool so as not to leave deep scars into the wood; wiping new coats of finish over the bare wood; caressing the smooth surface; finding my favorite part; hypothesizing about where the piece has been and what it has seen or heard. The table's history flooded my mind.

When I was a child, the table was a fort, a hiding place, a tent frame. It became Grandmother's work desk for her genealogy and Granddaddy's ledger table for his accounting. As I grew older, it hosted holiday feasts, reunion celebrations, and eventually funeral gatherings. Countless events, ones I had witnessed and ones I could only imagine, sifted through my mind as I worked on the table. The time, the table, the memories, the process became gifts – ones that I hadn't anticipated. And I rediscovered part of me that I had lost.

Each year Advent offers me the gift of peeling away layers, of sanding out scratches, of finding myself again. Recognizing that I wander and fret and rush through life, God extends to me this time for reflection and a promise of hope – simple yet extraordinary gifts.

*Caryl Miller Compton*

## November 28

Dear God,

As I enter this season of giving, help me, once again, to remember that true gifts come from Spirit. In Advent, these preparatory days of receiving your Greatest Gift, help me live with more spiritual focus and intention, reflecting on your Love as seen in your “Simple Gifts.”

I am awed by the multitude of your gifts, Lord, and none is *simple*. I see gifts I take for granted, and each one is evidence and part of the interconnectedness and complexity of life. Therein lies the paradox. What is simple about a sunrise, a child’s trusting face, a daffodil sprouting from a brown lump, an angel disguised as a friend, the intricacy of a snowflake, the smile of forgiveness, words of welcome, a handmade Mother’s Day card, eyes of hope, acceptance, patience, reconciliation, the Star of Bethlehem?

I’m still caught up in the commercial part of Christmas, and this has usurped my Advent time. It’s always been so convenient to rationalize giving “things.” It takes care (think about each individual), energy (buy, wrap), and resources (never seems to be enough budgeted). The recipients smile and look happy. Some even “ooh” and “ah.” The gifts are given. Advent and Christmas are over. I feel validated, assured of making good choices. I even feel the warmth of giving from the heart.

This *seems* to be OK with You, God. After all it’s the giving season and how we’ve always done it. Everyone does it this way, even spiritual people and churches. Toys for Tots, Operation Christmas Child — just two examples of sharing your Love through giving “things.” Why, then, do I not feel the calm? What teachings am I missing?

Help me to know in my core that the *real* gifts are always reflections of your Love, so they are “both/and.” Profound in their simplicity and valuable beyond cost, they are simple, but they are not easy. It’s more expedient to cover my distractions by making cookies, decorating for the holidays, even making an Advent wreath than to sit and listen for your voice. How much easier to donate to a worthy cause than walk alongside those whose needs the money supports. How much more I would rather buy something than forgive the one who receives it.

This year, God, help me give more real gifts — *simple* gifts, by genuinely reflecting your Peace and Love. This is so difficult for me. Show me again and again that ribboned packages, tree lights or written checks mean little without my being centered enough to let the Light of your Spirit shine through me in patience, humility, forgiveness and joy – at Advent, Christmas, and always.

Amen

*Sandy Londos*

## November 29

“As Dan looked down from the top of the silo to inspect the contents, his dentures just slipped out,” my cousin Kirby explained.

“Did he ever find them?” my cousin Tim asked.

“As they fed the cattle over winter, they looked for the dentures,” someone around the table continued the story. “No one ever saw them.”

“The saddest part was that the family went to eat that night at restaurant and he had to stay home with a bowl of soup.”

For the past ten years, as a caretakers of my parents, I drive to Kansas once a month. My father died over four years ago. Now I visit my mother. At least one evening while I’m there my sister and I gather my cousins together.

Around a table at the German buffet, we eat the food of my grandparents. Both cousins live on my grandfather’s farm. Both speak with a unique accent found only in this small Mennonite community. We are called “Schweitzers” because our family originated in Switzerland and continued to speak a Swiss dialect of German. Both attend the church of my great-grandparents. All will be buried in the cemetery with my ancestors who died in this country.

After the meal, we sit for a long time. Like other families, we report on the happenings of our children. We share our latest medical adventures, which are more frequent at our age. Unlike many other families, we talk politics and religion. Most importantly, we tell stories – stories of our parents, our grandparents, the neighbors, and our extended family. No one is in a hurry.

Is it an accident that we are bonded together in this heritage of place? I don’t believe so; rather, I know that it is an expression of my grandparents’ faith that they shared through the generations. Above all, they believed that the greatest gift they could give their children is faith in God and that faith is lived out in each one’s daily life in a community of believers that supports and cares for each member. Our family and the faith of my grandparents are woven together in ways that bind us together even today.

As the stories continue, I remember that this is much more than just a dinner. We are truly breaking bread together, sharing our lives, and in unspoken ways letting each one know that we are family – we are on this journey of life together. What a gift it is to be part of this heritage and this community.

“It was so flat out there, you could see fifty miles away. If you stood on a tuna can, you could see eighty miles,” someone says. It is time to go, but I cherish this moment. It keeps me grounded. It prepares me for the tough times ahead and helps me focus on what is truly important. It is a gift from God.

*Kathy Reid*

## November 30

I grew up in a blue collar family in Houston, Texas. My father worked a “sweaty” job 10 hours a day, 6 days a week, for 50 weeks every year of his life. My mother kept house, worked a half-acre garden. They taught me the habit of work. I began to get paid to work a “sweat” job at age 11. I started a business at age 25. In the course of my 30-year marriage I have averaged one full-time job and two part-time jobs almost every year. Not bragging, just a brief intro to the “aha” moment that occurred this past summer.

If someone had told me last November that I would find myself without a job in spring of 2011, I would have laughed. But in April of this year I was informed that my employer would not be renewing my contract. The business (because schools are no longer public services but businesses) was short of income and several of us left to keep it afloat. I was sure that I could find a job outside of education because I had a good work history and was deemed competent in several areas by many of my peers. I started looking and looking and by the time June rolled around I got worried. So, I went to the Texas Workforce Commission office to get help finding a job. I assured the nice lady working the “help” desk that I was not applying for unemployment. I was sent all sorts of “leads” by our helpful government. Most were offering pay at half of my previous salary. I was offered careers in managing an auto parts store or management training in fast food or managing a convenience store. I began to become discouraged by August. I began processing the papers to be legally unemployed. Mounds of paperwork and phone calls to government workers paralleled my increasing frenzy of job seeking.

How could this be happening to me? I had always worked hard and I knew God loved me. I began to wonder if something was wrong with my relationship with God as I had always believed that God’s approval was manifest on those who worked. God loved all people but He “really liked” us workers. My core suppositions began to be called into question. I had always believed that the wealthy were somehow out of grace due to their preponderance of money, and the poor were in need of grace because of their lack of it. God loved the middle class.

It was at this point one day that I had an epiphany. (Usually, only former Catholics have these.) I realized that my place in this world was not dependent on work but on God’s love. God did not love me because I worked any more than he/she would love me for not working. I was free to see work as a gift, not a curse or an obligation. I could now see work as the opportunity/gift to draw closer to God just as song and meditation were gifts to be enjoyed. I was approved to be on unemployment as of August 19, 2011. On that same day, I was offered a job in a local school district. I took the job with thanksgiving...not just because we now had an income and insurance, but I had the gift of sweat — the same gift I had my whole life but never had said “thank you” for.

*Rick Allen*

## December 1

I walked toward the moon. Then I turned and walked toward the sunset. Toward the sun. Toward the moon. The moon, the sun. Four blocks back toward the moon, rising over the high-pitched roofs. An about-face toward the sun, melting into the field of winter wheat. Back and forth I walked, in the interlude between day and night.

I knew I needed to head back to church. Advent preparations were calling — two more white candles at Hobby Lobby and evergreens at Lowe's for the wreath. But on my way back from Jan Williams's home for pyracantha berries, the moon beckoned me to stop in the new neighborhood off Bosque Lane, get out of my car, and walk toward it.

It was a walk unlike any other walk on a night unlike any other night on a street where I had never walked before. The evening was gloriously clear, and I wanted to remember the perfection of it all. I checked the Weather Channel on my phone: November 27, 2010. Current temperature: 56. Feels like: 56. Winds: Calm. Humidity: 4%. Sunset: 5:26 p.m. My heart purred as I walked. "It doesn't get any better than this."

A good walk is a gift. It's good for my bones, my blood pressure, my heart. It has the potential to play a part in boosting my immune system and gets my brain in sync with my body. A few times around the church garden clears my head and lifts my spirits. It eases worrisome thoughts and adds perspective when I'm overwhelmed. It grounds me. It puts me on eye-level level with the bird-feeders and the other walkers along my path. The "dog whisperer" says that if I walk my dog for thirty minutes in the morning and thirty minutes in the evening, I'll have a happy dog." I add, "and my dog will have a happy human."

For Whimsy, a walk is what happens between the words "Outside? Leash?" as we head out the door and the word "Treat?" as we come back inside. For me, a walk is fresh, invigorating air after two hours at the computer to jump-start my brain, yes, but it is also the focus I need to remind me of my place in creation before I re-enter my office.

I don't really think about all of these every time I walk — the Vitamin D I'm absorbing, the calories I'm burning, the briskness of my pace, though all those are gifts. Nor do I circle back home with the things that are troubling me all figured out, my prayers; articulated; my schedule, balanced; my little thoughts birthed into Full-fledged Ideas; my Advent meditation neatly composed in my head — though a walk is a container for considering all those things.

My Advent Eve walk near Jan's home helped me realize that a good walk may be, above all, a good margin. It is the time and space between the first step and the last, an interlude between where I was and where I will be — between the sun and the moon, between light and darkness, and finally, full Light. It was, on that late November night, a "holy" time," which is, by its very definition, set apart from the ordinary. Like Advent.

*Sharlande Sledge*

## December 2

Most of the simple gifts I've received these last few years have come on a bicycle, in a backpack.

Originally it was a bag of bananas, hanging from the front door in a white plastic bag. Next, it was two loaves of 12-Grain Whole Wheat bread. Once we got a whole bag of organic apples. (All of these were gleaned from the local soup kitchen's "free pile"). Other times, Freddie has helped with mowing the lawn or turning the garden. I also remember when he bought me a quesadilla at one of the little taquerias on the Avenue. For a long time, I insisted that he didn't need to do these things.

This shifted the night we made a feast together. Freddie had been staying on an air mattress in our living room for the coldest nights that winter. Usually, he came after dinner. But one night, he came early and decided we should go shopping to make a big dinner together. So we went to our local ALDI discount grocery store, where he insisted on buying a family-size bag of jumbo shrimp, along with avocados, two bags of blue corn chips, some mushrooms, and a package of all three colors of bell peppers. I kept asking, "Are you sure? That's too much!" Again and again, he laughed and assured me with a smile that "We are going to *eat*, man! We're having a party!"

As our basket filled, I started to see that maybe he deeply needed to give us these gifts. Maybe this was the time to shut my mouth, *receive*, and be thankful. It was time to trade roles of host and guest. Although I've seen Freddie maintain a very energetic friendliness in a wide variety of places, I imagine that the receive-and-be-grateful norms of most local soup kitchens and church pantries can slowly wear down one's dignity. I imagine he may be among many who leave hungry for chances to be giver and host.

It makes me wonder what gifts were brought to Christ not by the magi, but by the shepherds and peasant farmers. The simple gifts, brought by dirty hands and in rough sacks. What gleaned harvests did they share? What fresh wildflowers along the back trails? What wooden carvings or special stones? And was it hard for Joseph to receive those gifts? Was Mary embarrassed at their generosity? It's a good thing Christ came as a humble baby rather than a banquet host. As an utterly vulnerable being, Christ had no choice but to receive.

*Chris Homiak*

### December 3

Autumn is a time of rejuvenation after a long Texas summer. Students return to school and things seem to start fresh again as much of nature moves toward rest.

One of my favorite childhood memories is sitting on my bed, windows up with homework in hand, listening to the screeching of the cicadas. It was easy to let my mind drift as I heard their rhythmic chorus start from a faint hum and build to a crescendo and then fade again. The ebb and flow of this hypnotic sound was mesmerizing, and every year at this time my mind takes me back to those warm memories as a child in my small hometown of Gatesville. My friends and I would search the trees and posts for “bug cocoons” It wasn’t until much later that I learned these skins are left as young cicadas, after living on roots in the ground, split their skin and emerge as adults. There are 3000 cicada species, one of which only emerges every 17 years; apparently we have an Annual Cicada. The singing is actually adult males manipulating their abdomens to, you guessed it, attract a mate.

As music and sounds can trigger a variety of memories for all of us, the cicada always brings a sense of well-being to me, if only for brief moments each evening at dusk. This year’s weather conditions may have somewhat diminished the cicada’s fall song. If they fade, I will miss this “simple gift” and hope that their absence will be temporary. At the same time, I will receive some comfort knowing that each season brings its own simple gifts and God always will provide such wonders.

*Autumn teaches that fruition is also death;*

*That ripeness is a form of decay.*

*The willows, having stood*

*For so long near water, begin to rust.*

*Leaves are verbs that conjugate the seasons.*

—Gretel Ehrlich

*Van Jones*



## December 4

I've always had trouble with the lilies of the field, the part of the Beatitudes where Jesus calls for simplicity of circumstance and simplicity of spirit.

I get the simplicity of circumstance — I really do, though I don't practice it as much as I would like to or think I do. I know intellectually that stuff — material goods — really doesn't matter — witness the grace-filled responses of the Jones and Smallwood families to their losses by fire. Many of us struggle against materialism, particularly under the barrage of holiday ads, and I wonder about the contradictions in my life as I look at my Christmas tree overloaded with a forty-year accumulation of ornaments. But that I could change, if I really tried, really hard.

It's the simplicity of spirit that really confounds me. Don't worry about any of this — really, Jesus? Fears of poverty, war, and abandonment are real. What about the starving children in the world? If I don't worry about my long-term care insurance now, I may find my cute self out on the street in thirty years or so. I can no more stop worrying than I can stop breathing.

But the advice from wise people is there, consistent and persistent, to back up what Jesus said: the Buddhist monks with their begging bowls, sure that their needs for the day will be fulfilled, and Anne Lamott's observation that "perfectionism is based on the obsessive belief that if you run carefully enough, hitting each stepping-stone just right, you won't have to die. The truth is that you will die anyway and that a lot of people who aren't even looking at their feet are going to do a whole lot better than you, and have a lot more fun while they're doing it." Touché.

When Jesus said to build your house upon a rock, he didn't mean a real rock. He meant a rock of faith, in things unseen. I think trust of that sort must be a gift akin to grace: "I believe; help thou my unbelief." And, to borrow from Frederick Buechner, maybe the ability to trust, to be simple in spirit, is a gift too.

*Becca Sharpless*

## December 5

It was the strangest wedding gift anyone had ever seen. Looks of puzzlement filled the reception hall as the mother of the bride presented her daughter with a small, slightly battered tin bowl. Seeing her daughter's eyes brimming with tears, she quickly looked down and smoothed her traditional Chinese silk dress. But the memories washed over her.

She and her husband had only been married for a few years when the terrible famine began. Then she discovered she was pregnant, and in 1961, their daughter was born into a world of brokenness and despair. Malnourished and unable to nurse, she searched for a way to feed their newborn daughter. There was no milk to buy anywhere. Her husband asked everyone they knew, but nobody knew what to do. The situation seemed hopeless.

Then something amazing happened. Some women from the countryside heard about their situation and came and showed them how to soak and grind rice into a very thin gruel that they could feed the baby. As the months passed, they began to feed her with a spoon from a small tin bowl. But there was never very much. The portions of rice they received were so small.

The terrible sound that the spoon made when they scraped the bottom of that tin bowl is lodged in her memory, mingled with her daughter's cries. At first, the young couple did not understand why their daughter cried each time they scraped the bottom of the bowl. But then they realized that even at six months old, their daughter knew that when she heard that sound, there was no more food. From then on, the tears streamed down their faces when they scraped the bowl, listening to their daughter's hungry cries.

It is no small gift that all three of them lived; many of their family and friends did not. Year by year, she watched their daughter grow. And unbeknownst to anyone, she saved the little tin bowl. Sometimes, she took it out and lingered over it, remembering the remarkable gift of life they all shared. On her daughter's wedding day, she knew that everyone thought it was strange for her to give an old tin bowl as a gift. But her daughter knew what it meant, and that was all that mattered.

This story took on new meaning for me this year when my daughter was born. Sometimes, I look at Bridget's well-fed cheeks and think about the simple gift my beloved Chinese friend gave her daughter. And I am overwhelmed with gratitude. This year as we celebrate Bridget's first Christmas, the gifts of food, warmth, and love that Mary and Joseph gave to Jesus are full of extravagant meaning for me, as are the simple gifts of kind strangers, from a rice gruel recipe to an empty stable at an inn.

*Erin Cline*

## December 6

I have always loved the mountains. Whether in a long, low ridge like the Texas Hill Country or in dramatic, pyramid-like peaks as in the Alps in Switzerland, the majesty and mystery of mountains speak to my soul. However, when we built a cabin in the Smoky Mountains of North Carolina, I was afraid that seeing them day after day would cause me to lose my appreciation for their grandeur. I was afraid I would come to take them for granted. But I am discovering that my wonder and appreciation grow each time we visit.

I see the same mountain range from our deck every day, but it never looks the same twice. One day the top is lost in the clouds. The next day the summit looms over the mists below. One day it looks green from all the trees on its slope, but then the atmosphere changes, and the mountains appears to be a soft shade of blue, sometimes even purple. Clouds descend. Clouds rise. Wisps of clouds float across the view. And then, some days we are engulfed by clouds, unable to see beyond the railings of the deck. I can watch and photograph the view over and over and get lost in amazement at the constant change I see.

The gift of God's presence is like my clouds. I feel surrounded/engulfed by the Presence at times. God is so near that I can feel the mist on my face. At other times the Presence is distant, remote and yet hovering near. Or I can't see or feel the Presence at all. Nothing seems visible, real or connected to me.

Then is when I look to the hills from whence cometh my faith, and know the certainty of God's presence, power, strength, and grandeur. *The gifts of God, for the people of God*, as Dorisanne says at communion. I look to the mountains and the clouds and receive the gift of God.

*Libby Bellinger*



## December 7

My apron could tell you stories. Encrusted into it are the doughs, and batters, and sauces, and soups of days and nights spent experimenting, creating, escaping.

It could tell you of the bread with which I tried to knead away heartache.

It could tell you of the soup I created to fill the house with scents of Fall as the wind swirled and rain poured outside my windows.

It could tell you of the butter cake I made to share with the youth (ask Matthew Reynolds about that one!).

It could tell you of my Grandma Anne's beloved sour cream cookies I have tried each Christmas to perfect (and still have not gotten it right).

My counters would spill secrets through their stains.

The coffee smudges would tell of late nights reading and outlining and writing pages toward a lifelong dream.

The outlines of wine glasses would tell of conversations shared over countertops, laughing, crying and dreaming.

My cutting board bears slices and smells that might scratch deeper into my soul.

There are lines from the vegetables I slice when I need to think of something else besides one more job application.

There are smushes of flavor—garlic, onion, cilantro—whose flavors offer me new hope and fresh perspective.

My kitchen is my refuge. I can use my hands instead of my brain. I can create something deeply satisfying to fill immediate hunger. I can gather with friends around food, drink, scents, and spoons to share small moments.

The stains, the smudges, the slices, the marks of my messes evidence those same things, though much less visible, in my own life, and the result—the savory, sweet, sippable—also give evidence to the simple hope of God's promise of creation and recreation.

*Meredith Holladay*

## December 8

On May 17, 2009, I received one of the most important gifts of my life. On that particular Sunday, I was standing at the front of the sanctuary with Dorisanne as I joined Lake Shore as a member. I looked out over the congregation and thought, “I wish I could see myself the way these people seem to see me.” It then occurred to me that, just perhaps, you all saw something of me I’d been unable to see for a very long time.

It was at that moment I received the gift. It was the gift of community. It’s a gift that has continued to give. It was the missing piece of the puzzle, though I hadn’t realized it. If you’ve never been without the benefit of community, it may be difficult to realize how much you might have missed without it. You are left with reliance on yourself alone. When tragedy strikes, you’re left to face the pain locked inside yourself – no comforting hand to touch your soul. When joy arrives, if it does, its intensity is tempered by the lack of others with whom to share it.

One of the amazing things about the gift of community is its power, then, to take the focus off yourself. It has allowed me to begin to put away my image of me as the center of the universe. Rather than making my world smaller, it widened my vision beyond anything I might have hoped for in the past. It has made me feel a part of a much larger family even as my natural family has gotten smaller. Where isolation seemed for many years to provide me with safety, I’ve discovered how much safer it feels to be in the midst of people through whose eyes God’s love is reflected back to me.

As a child, Psalm 121 was a favorite. The King James version has it this way, “I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.” I failed to remember that the last part of this line is a question. The New American Standard Bible puts it more clearly, “I will lift up my eyes to the mountains; From where shall my help come?” I forgot for a very long time the answer to that question. It was a loving community who reminded me what I had previously known. “My help comes from the Lord, Who made heaven and earth.”

Even community is a process, however. But what a wonderful process it turns out to be.

Thanks be to God for the gift of you.

*Benjamin Eakin*

## December 9

If you walk into my pantry and look up to the top shelf on the left, you will see eight quart jars and eleven pint jars of beets. They are what remain of my annual Christmas gift of pickled beets from my mother. Over the years she has made me quilts and bathrobes, ceramic nativities and punch bowls, paintings and embroidered cup towels, but it is the beets I most love.

Beets grow well in the gardens of Colorado, and my sister-in-law faithfully plants enough rows to guarantee plenty for canning. Mother takes these beets, cuts off the crowns, boils them and slips the skins, cuts them into cubes, and then boils them briefly in syrup of vinegar, sugar, water, cinnamon, cloves, and allspice. Yum! Can you just imagine how wonderful the house smells during this process?

I grew up with home-grown and home-preserved foods. Even with a shortened growing season, our garden provided fresh vegetables all summer and enough extra to preserve for fall and winter. In late summer we drove to the western valleys of Colorado to buy pears and crabapples and peaches which we canned to eat as dessert or provide filling for fruit pies. Cucumbers became dill pickles and sweet pickles. Tomatoes became homemade catsup. Apples became jelly and applesauce. Even watermelon rinds were made into spicy sweet pickles.

But the beets have always been my favorite. I love their deep garnet-red color. It is easy to imagine how native cultures used beet juice as a red dye, and an accidental spill of beet juice sends me running for the stain remover. I love the texture of beets. I love the sweet/sour explosion of taste in my mouth when I bite down on them. Most days I will forgo dessert in favor of a serving of beets.

It's really quite simple. God provides the seed and the soil, my sister-in-law and mother provide the labor of gardening and canning, and I enjoy the gift of beets. Or maybe it's really a gift of love disguised as beets. Whatever it is, I am blessed.

*Loeen Irons*

## December 10

My home is covered in my child's simple gifts.

Smudged chalk drawings in pastel shades of pink, yellow, and blue cover the sidewalk leading up to the porch.

A catch of sun reveals small handprints at knee height on the glass door.

The decorative marbles I bought for the vase on the mantel are in the middle of the living room floor, sorted by color, shape and size.

On the refrigerator door are countless brightly colored magnets. These are her early combinations of letters, the beginning offerings of her words for the world.

And on windows and doors and closets and mirrors—art. Art in fingerpaint, marker, crayon, chalk, sequins. Some would look upon a young child's artwork and use such a profane word as scribble. When a mother looks upon her child's creation, the word is gift.

Sometimes I have to look longer to see the gift. Like when she painted the kitchen table with her applesauce this morning. Or when she turns the whole container of neatly categorized sprinkles over to create a sand sculpture. Or when she found the makeup bag—and the dog—at the same time.

And then come the words, "Look, Mommy."

Look, Mommy. See what I accomplished. See what I am learning. See what I am feeling. See how I am growing. See me wanting to share this with you.

As a mother of a young child, there are days when I call my house cluttered, or look at the glossy pages of the Pottery Barn catalog and covet a "prettier" life. It's understandable.

On my good days—my wiser days, I see the extravagant gift of it all. That my home is decorated, measured—in love.

*Jaime McGlothlin*

## December 11

After prayerful consideration, some members of our church feel they are led to a full-time ministry. This usually begins a beautiful learning process for us all. After a great deal of prayer and dialogue with our pastoral staff, some concerns are answered and affirmation is continued.

After a time a group of our fellowship is asked to serve on a discernment committee. The goal is to discuss and add support in the decision process through prayer, questions and conversation. It becomes a holy time.

I was honored to serve on such an *ad hoc* committee to meet with our church member Sunday Simbo, a native of Cameroon, Africa. During his studies at Truett Seminary he had serious questions about the direction of his ministry. Sunday brought with him a list of questions describing the kinds of experiences and challenges a minister might encounter in the future. These were shared with us before our next meeting. Getting the questions early allowed us time before we met again to reflect on the questions. We were to be prepared to share what we had learned.

Many of you are aware I spent most of my business life in the church furniture business. Looking at these questions from Sunday, my first thought was, “This is a piece of cake.” I carefully selected five pastors from three denominations, made calls, and all but one agreed to assist me by providing some answers.

Please do not think I am ungrateful, but on the very last day before our meeting, the answers arrived. I am ashamed to say this, but I was thankful to the one who refused to help me. Most of what I received probably came from a textbook course 101. One example was “You must be a strong leader, because that is what members need and look for.”

I was now in panic mode. *What to do?* I met with David Davis, told him my problem and asked him to look over the questions as well. We all are aware of David’s calm nature and the ability to think. Within a very short time I had my answer.

I was grateful to him because when one gets together with a group from Lake Shore, it’s best to be prepared. Everyone had ideas that were well thought out, and they were presented well. When it was my time, I remembered exactly what David said:

“Give up the Power.”

Although this was a few years ago, that answer is burned in my heart. I am just sorry it took so long for me to learn it.

*But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, **for power is made perfect in weakness.** So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” —2 Corinthians 12:9-10*

My thanks for Simple Gifts.

*Bruce Neatherlin*

## December 12

As a child, I remember eagerly anticipating each coming Christmas. Back to school meant the Christmas countdown had officially begun! I always made a calendar to tick off the days until *the* day. Once Halloween came and went, I knew we were in the holiday homestretch. I started writing out my gift wish list and giving not-so-subtle hints to my parents. Every other conversation with my parents included me saying, “Oh, I wish Christmas would get here!” and my mother replying, “Be patient, Tammy. Christmas is just around the corner!” Oh, how I thought Christmas would never come fast enough!

By the time Thanksgiving had passed, I would really become impatient. I was convinced time slowed down as Christmas Day approached. On Christmas Eve, I would go to bed extra early but would spend the night tossing and turning, daydreaming about Barbie dolls, Pound Puppies, and the Cabbage Patch Kid I so desperately wanted. I would wake up amazingly early, usually around 5:00 a.m., go admire all the presents under the tree, and then rouse the rest of the house with my shouts of glee.

Once everyone was assembled around the Christmas tree, chaos would ensue! My sister and I would tear through our presents at lightning speed and spend the morning playing with our gifts until we were called to the dinner table. Oh, those were the days! No worries, not a care in the world! Just fun, fun, fun!

As an adult, my thoughts about gifts have changed greatly. No longer do I care about what gifts I might receive for Christmas. In fact, I would actually prefer not to receive any gifts at all. I think sometimes we can get so caught up in the “stuff” of Christmas that we easily forget what Christmas actually means—at least I do. For me, it is not only a time to reflect on the birth of Christ as a gift to the world, but it is a time to stop and think about how grateful I am for the “simple gifts” of family and friends. How many times have I taken relationships for granted when life itself is so fragile and not a guarantee? Do I only think about these gifts on Christmas Day, or will I be more mindful of these throughout each day of the year? Also, how might I be a gift to others through word and deed? I can sum this up with a quote attributed to Laura Ingalls Wilder: “I am beginning to learn that it is the sweet, simple things of life which are the real ones after all.”

*Tammy Woods*

## December 13

Patricius is the name of the father of the famed Bishop of Hippo, St. Augustine, who lived in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. I want to meditate on him this Advent in part because of his relevance to our theme “simple gifts.”

The gift that Patricius contributed to the world – St. Augustine – is perhaps not a simple gift, but the role he played in gifting that gift to the world, by Augustine’s own account, appears to be negligible. Anyone who has read Augustine’s *Confessions* knows that his father does not come out looking good. While he meditates at length about his mother, he seems to wish that Patricius were not his father. Because Augustine’s *Confessions* details his adventures and misadventures on his way to becoming a Christian, his Christian mother, who played a significant role in this process, comes out looking quite good. However, his father, who did not become a Christian until the end of his life, does not feature prominently in his account. Thus it is that Augustine neglects a critical gift, which his father gave him – the gift of education. St. Augustine would probably not have even come out of his little village of Thagaste if his father had not struggled, in spite of his poverty, to send him to school.

I meditate on Patricius because his struggle to pay for Augustine’s schooling reminds me of my own father who, as poor as Patricius, did all he could to send me to school. I remember abandoning school several times because my life as a pupil and a student was very hard. But my father persuaded me to go back and struggle through. Did Augustine’s father ever persuade him to stay in school? My father never became a Christian, and I became a Christian through my mother, who is still a Baptist.

Looking back, however, I wonder what kind of Christian I would have become, if I did not have a good education.. What kind of Christian would Augustine have become if Patricius had not given him a good educational foundation? Would we have still had his *Confessions*? If my father had not sent me to school, would you still be reading this brief meditation written by me?

Whenever I think of Patricius, I give thanks to God.

*David Tonghou Ngong*

## December 14

When I was a child, growing up in a historical Indiana river town on the Ohio River, (Madison, Indiana) I was more focused on the material benefits of Christmas. And there were so many! - my family was not wealthy, but we were comfortable because of my dad's position as a Presbyterian minister in medium-sized prosperous churches. Almost every material Christmas gift that I received gave me some emotional pleasure - my parents seemed to choose my Christmas gifts with exceptional skill - every present that I received on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day during my childhood glowed with a special purpose and utility - a new radio, a new camera, a new board game, a new record album, a new bicycle (handmade by my dad!). I took these material gifts on Christmas Day and I treasured them.

As I moved into adulthood and was blessed and surprised with the miracle of my own children, I recognized this truth - Christmas is for kids! (at least the material aspect). Christmas became more of a struggle to see that our kids were not disappointed. Christmas became a financial challenge. My children's mother and I always worked hard to produce a substantial pile of gifts under our daughters' Christmas tree that our children would appreciate. I believe we succeeded. At times, our income was anemic, but our Christmases were materially bountiful, and I am proud of that accomplishment. I developed new appreciation for my parents' ability to make my Christmases materially abundant, because I now understand that it required significant economic sacrifice.

But now, as I move through middle age, my thoughts about Christmas have changed greatly. Christmas is no longer about material abundance (my Christmas experiences as a child) or about financial sacrifice (my Christmas experiences as a parent with young children). Instead, Christmas is the staggering revelation and realization of the gifts that REALLY matter. Christmas helps me reflect upon my countless blessings with bewildered amazement, gratitude, and tears.

Yes, some material gifts have tremendous sacredness and staying power - their light shines for years, decades, a lifetime - a wedding ring for someone who is blessed with a happy marriage is one example. Yet eventually (with rare exceptions), material gifts eventually crumble - they are only symbols - they are not the things that really matter. Our most precious and real gifts are rooted in joy, love, and hope - they cause us to fall on our knees in thanksgiving. And we know what these gifts are - to have someone freely say "I LOVE YOU" and mean it; to have a spouse or significant other who blesses you by touch, encouragement, and loyalty; to experience the beauty of poetry, Scripture, and literature; to receive and give a hug; to experience emotional intimacy, spiritual intimacy, physical intimacy, and psychological intimacy with another human being; to see your children make their way in the world as happy and healthy adults; to learn something new every day; to receive and to show empathy, love, and peace with someone else; to find hobbies and activities that give us

personal joy; to give hope to ourselves and others; to uplift, encourage, and respect, and more than anything else; to understand that the Christ Child wants *US* and everyone else on this spinning blue earth ball to be deeply immersed in a warm safe ocean of the precious gifts that give us real life and lasting empowerment.

So on Christmas Day or Christmas Eve, after we open our material gifts in shiny wrapping, let us take some time - some real focused time - to reflect on our blessings and to say to our loved ones and friends, "I love you" in word, deed, and touch. And in that respect, let Christmas come every day of the year!

*John DeVries*

## December 15

“Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief.  
Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now.  
You are not obligated to complete the work,  
but neither are you free to abandon it.”

—*adapted from the prophet Micah and the Talmud*

It happens more readily than I would like to admit. The critical mass of the world’s grief tempts me to turn away. And in the face of things like the atrocities of war and genocide, natural disasters, famine, and poverty, I sometimes slip into shock and start to feel numb.

But, as the biblical prophets remind us all, we are not free to abandon the humble work of justice and mercy. People around the corner and halfway around the world are hungry *now*. People in our neighborhoods and in struggling nations abroad are suffering injustice *now*. And every person I know, including me, needs forgiveness and compassion *now*—just to make it through another day.

I marvel that an infinitely loving God, understanding the breadth and depth of human pain and longings in a way that I can never comprehend, chose simply to show up in the midst of us. To enter the world the same vulnerable way we do, through a mother’s womb. To take life day by day, developmental hurdle by hurdle. To learn a trade and mature through experience. To grow in faith and consider the call of ministry. And to simply walk the dusty roads of life, supporting people in their search for truth and healing—responding lovingly to their needs, *our* needs.

So if God’s choice for a universe overcome by fear and darkness, with all their crippling manifestations, is the simple gift of presence—of doing, loving, and walking humbly within it, then surely it can inform and inspire our own choices as we seek to follow in God’s steps.

Dearest Infant God,  
Your presence among us,  
yea, right here in our arms—  
has opened our eyes and hearts  
to the holy bliss of your infinite love.  
Teach us your kind of simplicity,  
and how to focus on the weightier matters.  
Help us to overcome the fears that can shut us down  
and hinder our just, loving, and merciful response  
to our brothers and sisters  
traveling with us on the journey each day.  
We want more than anything  
for our lives to be simple gifts  
that bless others and honor you.  
Amen

*Deborah Harris*

## December 16

Breath

Forging the cosmic cadence of the familiar

Inhale the halcyon of sunshine waterfalls

Exhale the intoxicating sighs of love

Inhale recollections of effervescent childhood games

Exhale the tears of mortality

Breath

The strength of many, the strain of some,

The solitude of none

Ebb and flow in the bay of humanity . . . Breathe

*Terri Evans*

## December 17

I acknowledge that I am one of those people who are hard to shop for. So the next time you see my mother, give her a big pat on the back. Every year we go through this dance where she is extremely generous and buys far more than my brother and I should get as adults.

I'm terrible at receiving gifts. For three and a half reasons: 1) I want it the way I want it. If it doesn't come to me in the exact way I envisioned, I am disappointed; 2) gifts are one of my love languages. If I receive a gift I don't like, it feels like that other person doesn't know me; 3) I'm a practical minimalist. If there isn't a use for it, I don't want it; 1/2) it's possible I have a touch of greed that waits around to come out at the most joyous of moments like Christmas mornings or birthdays.

It doesn't escape me that my behavior is antithetical to what Christmas is about, or gift giving for that matter. I try, honestly, to pretend to be excited when I hate it; but for an actor I am pretty miserable at acting on Christmas morning....or my birthday...or a surprise care package.

That's not to say that there isn't a track record of sorts. There was the year Mom forgot to order me presents, so I ended up with a hair dryer and a Showermate radio, and the time I got a hunting and fishing GPS instead of one for the car, or a giant trash can because it looked different in the catalogue. But those are, of course, the ones I remember and make me laugh.

Mom is the primary gift giver in the house. She pretty much does all the big stuff, and then Dad buys his little trinkets for the ladies and some sports related thing for my brother. My brother is similar to me. Did I ask for it? Is it exactly what was on my list? And do you have a receipt so I can return it? Chip and I may have taken all the fun out of gift giving and turned it into a business transaction.

“What do you want?”

“A gift card to Gap. What do you want?”

“A gift card to Bass Pro.”

“Done.”

“Done.”

When I reflect on my behavior I am struck by how entitled, American, and selfish I am — particularly given that my own financial situation doesn't always allow me to give a tangible gift. Last year I wrote “raps” about each person in the family and performed them.

I do not know what it is to really have nothing. I don't know what it is to not be able to come home. I don't know what it is to be so afraid that I am going to starve to death, or die of AIDS, or childbirth, or loneliness. I don't know what it means to be truly without; and I pray that this Christmas as I unwrap each box that I do a dance of joy for each gift that comes in the wrong size, color, style, or is just flat-out bizarre because each one is from someone who loves me, provides for me, and holds me. And that is the simple gift.

*Gillian Bellinger*

## December 18

Every night from the seventh through the tenth grades, I slept connected to a machine. Each night before bed I would attach four electrodes to carefully placed “x’s” marked on my back and all night long the machine would work to straighten my spine for six seconds, then rest for six seconds, straighten, then rest. During those years I was part of an FDA approved study for an alternative treatment for scoliosis to the commonly used back brace. The idea was to try and “train” my back muscles to do what they should have already known to do—move in a way that kept my spine straight and not in the S-curve into which it had settled during early adolescence. I’ll be honest. It wasn’t a pleasant experience and I wasn’t the ideal study participant. So many factors, not the least of which was the literal pain of the process, made it a difficult few years.

Even so, for those years and the years following, I trained in something I hadn’t expected—the gift of perspective. It manifested in all kinds of ways. This machine, that was not supposed to hurt, did. Because of that, I often had on my mind those people who struggle with chronic pain. I did not have chronic pain. If there was some kind of crisis—say a stomach bug or a night when I just couldn’t possibly take it—I could turn the machine off. I was very mindful that people with chronic pain could do no such thing with a pain that was likely so much greater than mine. In addition I was mindful that during the day I could run track and play basketball, all without having to worry about how a brace might have limited my abilities to do certain things. For years after my treatment ended, I never failed to be grateful when after a long day I could just fall into bed. In college, when I would roll on my stomach and tuck my arms up under my pillow, I was filled with gratitude because the machine didn’t allow me to sleep that way.

Lest I sound like I’ve bounded through life with the greatest of perspectives on all that I have, let me confess that I have not. These last, oh, fifteen to twenty years I’d forgotten this perspective that came automatically for so long. It took the prodding of reflecting on Simple Gifts to remind me again.

So often when we’re thinking about how to shape our lives as a church, how to shape our words, it feels like we’re really not offering anything new. Maybe this Advent is our time to name out loud that what we’re really trying to do is prompt and train each other to notice the kinds of things we should already know to do. May God be in the midst of all our efforts.

*Dorisanne Cooper*

## December 19

We can all remember times when cash was in short supply and we struggled to live life with limited resources. The deprivations in recent economic times have reminded us that far too many people are living in reduced circumstances, yet still have families to feed, mortgages to pay, and communities to support.

When I think about what Christmas is like during lean times, I'm reminded of the many years of our student days when we tried to do as much as we could on meager resources. A Christmas tree was a luxury. Planning a Christmas meal took careful consideration of the entire month's budget. It was fine when it was just the two of us but when we had children the reality of "too little" made planning for Christmas a challenge. Using imagination and ingenuity was absolutely necessary.

When our oldest daughter was three, I began plans for Christmas weeks in advance. In a shopping trip to downtown Zurich, I found Christmas ornaments for a reasonable price. And they were silver bells! While this might not have mattered to the average consumer, it just so happened that our daughter had made me sing "Silver Bells" to her every night during the previous Christmas season. She loved that song and it meant Christmas to her. So here was a tangible reminder (complete with a true bell sound!) of a Christmas past. I added silver bells to my small shopping basket.

Then I made the find of my shopping trip. I discovered a small crèche made from wood, complete with nativity characters cast in a child-friendly plastic. In order to draw out my surprise to my daughter during the Advent season, I wrapped each bell and each character in paper and devised a hanging ribbon draped across a shelf at a child's eye level. At the beginning of Advent, I gave her the crèche and a few of the animals and told her we would open a small package every day. She quickly got to work placing the sheep and the cows in the small crèche and we kept the crèche where she could play with it any time she desired.

I wish I could say that we kept up the Advent daily package opening in a time that spanned all of Advent; but with a three-year-old, once you have Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus, you are ready for entire cast of characters. Thus, after a week we ended up opening every package, placing the silver bells on our small tree (yes, I had to sing "Silver Bells" every time) and assembling all of our crèche figures into their small home.

What I remember most about that activity — which I did in order to give my daughter a tactile way to tell and retell the birth narratives — came on the day when she unwrapped the angel. She immediately loved the angel figure and asked me what was written on the banner she held in her hand. I told her it said "Gloria" for what the angels sang when they announced the Savior's birth to a group of shepherds one night. I don't think she heard me at all because she announced that *this* angel's name *was* Gloria. To this day, when we take out the old crèche (now falling apart),

my daughter speaks fondly of “Gloria the Angel.”

The crèche reminds my daughter of learning and playing the Christmas narrative as a child. The crèche reminds me of an angel named Gloria who is forever etched in my daughter’s version of the Christmas story.

So I found it very interesting this month when a mail order catalog arrived full of inexpensive Christmas decorations that one of the items was a set of nativity figures designed as magnets. I could imagine small children playing with these magnets (priced at \$5.99!) on a refrigerator or a magnetic board. There were magnets of the stable, the shepherds, the wise men, the sheep, the cows, Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus, and of course, an Angel. I couldn’t tell if she had a banner in her hand, but I know one thing for certain. Her name is Gloria.

*Melanie Nogalski*

## December 20

*“The people who walked in the darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.”*

*Isaiah 9:2*

For one of our early anniversaries as Lake Shore’s youth ministers, the youth committee, chaired by Kristi SoRelle at the time, presented us with a lamp. It was made out of brushed silver and glass, topped off with a cream-colored shade.

As we stood at the front of the congregation that Sunday morning Kristi said, “May this lamp provide you with light, just as you have given our youth light.”

We took it home and considered where we would place it. We decided it’s light was best shed on our bedroom dresser – a spot we didn’t realize needed light until we turned the lamp on. My crystal ring-holder emerged from the darkness as well as our engagement picture and precious figurines I’d collected over the years. I could now do my hair at the spacious dresser because I could actually see myself. The light was also just enough to leave on in the evenings while we pattered around the house before bed, inviting us to settle in for the night and rest.

But the warm glow of our new lamp also revealed the layer of dust we’d let collect on the dark, cherry wood. This meant more frequent dusting. But that was fine. It was something that needed doing anyway.

Since our move to our new home that lamp resides on my bedside table. As autumn days become shorter and the nights become longer moving us towards winter, I use my lamp more but I don’t think too much about it’s origin. It has become a permanent fixture in my bedroom – both functionally and aesthetically. I blindly reach for its switch when my alarm wakes me in dawn’s darkness. I’m half-asleep but I know my lamp will be there.

It’s ironic that we treat the people and things that are most precious to us this way – pets, family, homes, faith. I have staked my life on the never-failing light and love of God, but most days I treat my faith like the lamp – a permanent fixture in my life that I use when I’m half-asleep.

When I undertook my first journey through the starkness and simplicity of Advent years ago, the light of Christ on Christmas was surprising, almost blinding. But as the years go by, I know the Advent journey from darkness to light, from Isaiah to John the Baptist, and from the angel to Mary. I know how the story goes. I blindly reach out to light the Christ candle and don’t even see it. In fact, I’ve been living in the Christ-light so long I’ve put on my sunglasses and don’t even notice what I’ve done.

So where does that leave me this Advent? Eighteenth century Baptist contemplative Anne Dutton wrote to God,

*“Beloved, since none of my imperfections can make any alteration in your love, let your unchangeable grace make an alteration in me!*

*Since my darkness cannot take away your love, let your love take away my darkness...”*

And so I begin my Advent journey.

*Rachel Sciretti*

## December 21

My mother gave the best Christmas gifts. None of the family had to make a Christmas list for her. She usually put Christmas presents aside throughout the year as she found them for me, my three brothers, and eventually our spouses and children. Though sometimes each of our families would receive the same “theme” gift (I remember the year of the extra large laundry baskets, when Walt & I had to struggle to fit our basket in the car for a return trip to Tennessee), mostly, the gifts were tailored carefully for each person. She paid attention and remembered interests or needs that we might have mentioned a few times, maybe even just once in passing. Mom’s gifts were never generic; they clearly demonstrated her intentions, focused on what would meet our needs or give us joy. It wasn’t uncommon for us to receive a gift that we didn’t realize we wanted until we opened it and declared it a perfect choice. A few unexpected yet cherished gifts I remember are the 11-pound unabridged dictionary I received to help with UIL spelling competitions in high school, the harvest gold mixing bowls that are still my favorites for baking, and the Play-Doh Barber Shop set I received as a Baylor undergrad because its TV commercial always made me laugh. The most prevalent gifts over the years were books—cookbooks, inspirational books, novels, picture books, how-to books—each inscribed with a loving message.

When we spent Christmas away from Texas, we always looked forward to opening Mom’s package to see wrapped gifts labeled for each of us—the framed Christmas scene she cross-stitched, an updated *Fanny Farmer Baking Book* for Walt with familiar New England recipes to satisfy his sweet tooth, a cloth nativity set that 3-year-old Isabelle could play with, a set of pop-up books with Christmas carol lyrics that Isabelle still loves. Many years Mother would also send Christmas gingerbread cookies or molasses crinkles she’d baked. In some ways, the gifts we anticipated even more were the “little” gifts — the unwrapped presents we thought of as “stocking gifts”: *Brer Rabbit* syrup I craved from my childhood, colored wooden toothpicks Mom tracked down after we couldn’t find them anywhere in western North Carolina, the pocket calendar just the right size to carry in my purse, ‘color catchers’ for the laundry because she remembered a conversation with Walt about bright colors bleeding onto other clothes in the wash, a new set of markers and a beautiful Christmas angel ornament for Isabelle.

Since Mom’s death, I grieve that there will be no more packages from her to open on Christmas day. It has been over two years, but I continue to miss so many things: her voice singing “It came upon a midnight clear,” a quiet moment together at the table over a Diet Coke during busy holiday preparations, her stories to Isabelle of family Christmases past, the joy she expressed in seeing her children and grandchildren together, her prayers settling over me like the coziest blanket on a winter night. My mother was instrumental in leading me to Lake Shore, and it saddens me that we won’t share a Christmas Eve candlelight service here.

These days, I bake molasses crinkles and cut-out cookies with Isabelle myself; I use the 11-lb dictionary more to press flowers than to look up spelling words, and some of the gifts have been broken or lost.

But my mother left me with gifts that will remain throughout my life: curiosity about the world, a love of reading and music, the power of faith and compassion, the importance of family, and the simple but profound experience of having been loved deeply and unconditionally.

Proverbs 17:8 from Peterson's *The Message* says: "Receiving a gift is like getting a rare gemstone; any way you look at it you see beauty refracted." The enduring beauty of my mother's gifts is in the love they represent, the care she took in choosing just the right gift for each person, and the close attention she paid to our needs and desires.

*Thank you, God, for the families you give us, for the embodiment of your love through such important relationships in our lives. Help us to recognize the love inherent in the gifts we receive, and to demonstrate your love in our gifts to others.*

*Jeanne Dodd Murphy*

## December 22

When I think of simple gifts I don't think of any one item I have received over the years, rather I think of the truths that have been learned along the way. So during this Advent, I am reminded of my childhood and how I learned a simple, important truth that taught me much about life. A word of warning to all the parents reading this to children, I will tell about the time I learned there was no Santa Claus.

I can't remember many of the presents that I have received for Christmas over the years, but I remember this one very well. I was in second grade and I wanted them so badly. They were called Hit Stix. They were two electronic drum sticks connected by cords to a small speaker that clipped on the belt. When the sticks hit any object, or even in mid-air, they would make synthesized drum sounds. To have these would allow seven-year-old me to play the drums all over the house, on tables, on countertops, the TV set, and even siblings' heads. I was sure that Santa wouldn't let me down. I wrote letter after letter. I tried so hard to be good, just to get the Hit Stix.

So it happened that one afternoon while I was helping my mother in the kitchen baking Christmas treats that she asked me to retrieve something from the closet. But she failed to tell me which closet, so what happened wasn't my fault. I went to her bedroom and opened up her closet door, searching in bags and boxes, looking for whatever it was I was sent for. I searched harder than ever; however, I found something else instead. It was my Hit Stix. Quickly I left the closet, hoping not to be seen inadvertently snooping in the Christmas presents. I will say that I did return later to play with the Hit Stix which already had batteries and were ready to go.

It wasn't until Christmas day that I realized what I discovered. The present was from Santa, not my parents. I must confess that I really didn't care who gave me gifts but I still had a dilemma. If I told my parents that I knew who really bought me presents and acknowledged that there was no Santa then I might be jeopardizing Christmas for everyone. So for years after I would let my parents pretend for me as I raked in the gifts.

In later years, I've thought about this memory and how unconcerned I was with the notion that I was lied to or taught to put my hope in a made-up figure. My reaction as a child may have been because I wanted future gifts, but I wasn't even secretly upset or heartbroken of this idea that there was no Santa. I was somewhat relieved that I didn't have to rely on a distant persona to bring me things, but that my family and those closest to me were there to supply my needs and wants. The gift I got years ago wasn't the Hit Stix because they broke. The gift I received was security and confidence in those around me. It was a simple gift that wasn't intended and wasn't wrapped.

*Charles Conkin*

## December 23

A bad version of a Brittany Spears song blared through the restaurant, sung by a tipsy college girl. Next was “He Stopped Loving Her Today,” not too bad, by an older grizzly looking man. It was Christmas Eve, and there I sat at karaoke night with a friend and his family, who could not care less. There had to have been a church nearby; I could hear bells tolling in between off-key renditions of pop songs. They chimed eleven o’clock and then marked the time for 11:15, 11:30, and 11:45pm, counting down the time to the celebration of God incarnate. I thought about trying to follow the bells to a midnight mass, but I didn’t know the city, and I didn’t want to offend. So I sat, despondent, thinking of all of the merry-making that I was missing out on. My soul ached to be with the church, my people, for whom this night was so significant. I wanted to speak in hushed tones about peace on earth, and then sing in exaltation with the angels. Instead, there I sat with my fish and chips and my glass of wine, listening to a sad old man sing, “. . . And soon they’ll carry him away. He stopped loving her today . . .”

The song finished just before midnight, and two young men stepped up for their turn at the microphone. My ears perked up and I recognized the song immediately. I thought it might be a joke, and was surprised when sure enough, they started singing, “Come they told me, pa rum pum pum pum, a newborn King to see, pa rum pum pum pum. . .” It was just a simple carol, not even one of the big-hitters, but it was like a light bursting through the sea of gloomy people. The gift of an unexpected song in a cheerless bar transported me into communion with the saints. As they sang, the bells outside chimed midnight, and I was overcome by an impromptu (and unorthodox!) act of worship. As laughter and smoke swirled around me, I took a cold French fry and dipped it in my glass of pinot grigio, and, with the brothers and sisters all over the world and through all of the ages, I tasted the body and blood of Christ. God-made-flesh for me on that night.

“I played my drum for him, pa rum pum pum pum, I played my best for him pa rum pum pum pum . . .” The little drummer boy and the scraps of leftover food on my table might not have been ideal, but I suspect they were God’s gift to me that night. They were the elements and the liturgy, and a gift I will always cherish. “Then He smiled at me, pa rum pum pum pum, me and my drum.”

*Natalie Webb*

## December 24—Christmas Eve

It was still dark - *la madrugada* - and I was out on our patio/garage hanging out some laundry. Generally it is very quiet at such an hour, with no sound but the wake-up call of the roosters. But I heard a rustle and a scratching above me, at the top of the wall, so with a wet shirt in my hands I stopped and looked up. There, hanging over the wall, was a small brown hand - and in the hand was a mango.

Puzzled, I stared at that mango and wondered rather stupidly why a mango would be hanging over our wall. Then the little hand shook the mango and stretched it a little lower. I edged a little closer and heard a whisper: *un regalo!*

—*Para mi?*

—*Para usted!*

So I scrambled around to find something to stand on, and finding nothing, hoisted myself up on the concrete *pila* that served as laundry sink, kitchen sink, mop sink, and bathroom lavatory. Unsteady and teetering, I reached up and just barely reached that mango. With the fingers of one hand I touched the back of the outstretched hand, and carefully, slowly, the mango was released into my hand.

*Gracias!* I called into the dark, as the child's hand disappeared over the top of the wall. I heard a thud as she jumped to the ground and quick, light footfalls as she ran back inside her house.

Now you would think that I would begin wondering *Who was the giver?* And *Why did she give it?* And *How did she know I was here?*

But I didn't. I just received it. I found a knife, sat down, and enjoyed the sweetest, juiciest mango I have ever tasted. It wasn't until I had finished and had wiped the juice from my chin that I was overcome with gratitude, thinking *I must find her and say a real thank you! I want to know who she is!* So I quickly got dressed, went out the front door, turned left down the dirt street and then left again down the *andenne*. There it was - the house that it *must* have come from - but the house was dark and silent.

I returned daily around the corner, looking to find the little girl whose hand it was - the giver of such a lovely gift - but each time returned disappointed.

As time went on, I began looking at every girl child (and eventually, every boy child) in our *barrio* with the unspoken question Was it you? I chuckled to myself, How very like Babushka! Looking in the face of every child and wondering "Is this the One?"

Having fun with that thought, it also occurred to me how very like Saint Nicholas this child had been! Giving a gift in the dark and going away quickly so as not to be seen, taking a great and secret delight in giving with no need for or expectation of a "thank you."

As I remember the imagined stories of simple gifts for the Christ Child, like the drummer boy playing his drum, or the little shepherd bringing a lamb, why not imagine some sweet brown-skinned child with a mango?

*Jo Pendleton*

## December 25—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.*