

Comfort and Joy



*An Advent Calendar of Meditations:
Making Holy Time in the Year of our Lord 2020*

by the people of the Church of the Good Shepherd, Dunedin FL

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Sunday, November 29

The First Sunday of Advent

By Michael Durning, Priest-in-Charge

Dear Friends in Christ,

Welcome to “Comfort and Joy”, a selection of Advent meditations for the year 2020. In these pages, our parish leaders share their story. All have summoned the resilience to practice their ministries while negotiating the tough demands of a Pandemic. We offer these stories knowing that there is a host of contrasting feelings in our parish family. Among us are those who have suffered, those who have rejoiced with a new birth and those who continue to support their families, all not knowing when this will end.

May these stories bear witness to God’s love.

We begin our Advent journey by taking a look at the theme of “Comfort.”

Years ago, Bonnie Jean and I worked in center city Philadelphia. I worked for a publishing company and Bonnie Jean for a marketing research organization. Our offices were not very far from each other and we would commute together into town every day. This commute involved taking the “D” bus, which took about an hour from beginning to end.

It was not long before I realized that this bus was a rolling community. Certain people took certain seats. People knew one another, their birthdays, and their children’s names. The web of relationships on this bus meant, among other things, that time would fly. If a story got interesting enough, I would almost miss my 8th Street stop and be late for work.

As Christmas approached, we newlyweds knew that we were late in our preparations and we needed a tree, a REAL tree for our new home. Getting off the bus one evening, we realized that there was a tree stand close to the stop. We bought a very modest “Charlie Brown” tree which we dragged up the long hill at 69th street to our home.

We had very little in 1973 yet that humble tree, the conversations on the “D” bus and the march up the hill, tree in tow, are all reminders that God enriches us through humble and everyday things. As we face the several complexities of our time, may the coming of the Lord Jesus “to certain poor shepherds” also come to us and comfort us in simple things.

Monday, November 30

By Diane Niford, Vestry Class of 2021

The answer is . . . **Cookies!**

The question is “what brings you comfort and joy?” This could be a very short, two-line meditation . . . but why be brief.

My mother was 100% Swedish, and never did we know that more than when, after Thanksgiving, she immediately began to work on the Swedish tradition of having seven varieties of cookies for the Christmas celebrations. We five daughters were included in the baking, frosting, decorating; and because of her heart disease were solely responsible for getting them to the basement freezer.

We almost liked the freezer part best, as we knew exactly where each cookie resided in that large chest freezer – and almost preferred them frozen. When she asked that we trot the cookie tins upstairs to prep for an event and she discovered just how MANY cookies had been eaten frozen there was, surprisingly, no reprimand. She would just laugh and whip up another batch.

This did not change from year to year, no matter what was happening. Not even the year my brother received emergency leave from the Navy for an early Christmas because the doctors feared 12 year old Linda would succumb to leukemia before the Holiday. It was a devastating time.

Looking back at it I am inspired by her courage and love. She was determined to bring us a bit of sameness, comfort and joy; even at a very sad and devastating time for our family.

This is my favorite cookie recipe from childhood, one of the seven I bake with my children and grandchildren to continue this loving and tasty Christmas tradition.

Frosted Sugar Cookies with Anise-flavored icing: 4 dozen

1/2 c. butter, 1/4 cup oleo 1 c. sugar 2 eggs 1 tsp. vanilla 1 tsp salt

1 tsp. baking powder 2-1/2 c. flour

Blend and chill at least one hour. Heat oven to 400 degrees. Roll dough 1/8” thick and cut with a variety of Christmas cookie cutters. Bake 6-8 minutes, to a golden color.

Icing: 1 c. sifted powdered sugar 1/4 tsp. salt 1/2 tsp. anise flavoring (or your choice) 1-1/2 tbsp. cream or 1 tbsp. water food coloring sprinkles to decorate

(When decorating with children, swath the table with Saran wrap for easy clean up – a trick my son passed on to me when he began baking with his girls)

Tuesday, December 1

By Cheryl Sharpe, Vestry Class of 2021

The Lord Almighty answers, "I will send my messenger to prepare the way for me. Then the Lord you are looking for will suddenly come to his Temple. The messenger you long to see will come and proclaim my covenant." But who will be able to endure the day when he comes? Who will be able to survive when he appears? He will be like strong soap, like a fire that refines metal. He will come to judge like one who refines and purifies silver. As a metalworker refines silver and gold, so the Lord's messenger will purify the priests, so that they will bring to the Lord the right kind of offerings – Malachi 3:1-3

The passages I have been reflecting on for this meditation have been all about getting clean, becoming pure, and refining ourselves in preparation for the messenger of the Lord.

Coming clean is a fascinating process to me. Growing up, I would watch my dad use strong soap to clean the oils from his hands so that he could leave his work as a mechanic in his shop, rather than bring it to the table. As a dental hygienist, I am familiar with this process of coming clean. Before and after every encounter with a patient I scrub my hands with soap and water or grab chemical disinfectant to remove the germs, infectious material, or remnants of one visit before transitioning to another. The process, repeated so many times during the course of the day has evolved into a ritual that helps me to remember to prepare myself in other ways as I move from one person's sacred space to another person's space. As I scrub, I tend to pray for the person or people I have left, remembering what pieces of themselves they have entrusted in God's and my care. As I scrub between patients, I pray for discernment of what I need to leave outside the door of this encounter – my worries, my anxiety, my struggles, and my fear and be sure to listen and hear their story and say the right words to them. I come clean in more ways than one.

Malachi's image of the strong soap made me wonder what I need to do to get clear, clean, and centered in preparation for God's message during this Advent season. What might each of us as individuals and as a community of God's children need to do to come clean in preparation for the Peace that God has for us? Fulling wool, which is what the reference of the strong soap in the passage, is a process to eliminate oils, dirt, and other impurities, but the process also makes the wool thicker, thus easier to work. May God's Messenger work like fullers' soap in our lives. May the fears, anger, and worries that strangle our peace be rinsed away and bring us comfort and joy during this Advent Season.

Wednesday, December 2

By Michelle Schombs, Diocesan President, Episcopal Church Women

“O tidings of comfort and joy” ! This is the well known refrain from the hymn “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen”. How often we approach Advent thinking of the joy of the Christ child. However, where do we find the comfort?

As Episcopal Church Women the comfort ministries often find their way to us. Women of the National Episcopal Church will celebrate 150 years of comfort to the world in 2021. In our Diocese of Southwest Florida, we are beginning our 51st year of service.

As I visit the seven deaneries in our diocese, I am always moved by the way in which women are serving in their local parishes. In one, the ECW supports women of low income by providing free mammograms. They also comfort women who are going through treatments for cancer and other diseases by driving them to appointments, providing meals and child care and just being there.

ECW brings comfort so often by providing mourning families with beautiful funeral receptions. These women are the quiet force behind preparing the church with tissues, lovely memorial service bulletins and even serving at the altar during the service.

It is our joy to bring comfort to others through serving on prayer support groups; holding in thought and prayer those in our parishes who are charged with the tasks of searching for a new rector, preparing for stewardship campaigns and bringing communion to our shut-ins. In our weekly prayers on Sunday we ask that God will “... comfort and succor all those in need, sorrow or any other adversity.”

Comfort for me is the bringing of hope to those who feel hopeless, lost, unloved and those crying out to the Lord. Sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ and his love for all of his children is a way for us to comfort each other.

I know that I personally turn to the Psalms when searching for comfort. Psalm 121:7-8, “The Lord will keep you from all harm – he will watch over your life; the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.” is especially comforting during times of uncertainty. Also, there is much comfort in Psalm 23 not only in times of grief but also in those times that anxious thoughts fill my mind. He is always there.

At this time of year, I think about that small baby, born in a stable, to parents of few means. Where did they find comfort? Surely, most of us would not consider a stable as comfort however it gave shelter and comfort to this family and great miracle. He came as a baby. He taught us an itinerant preacher. He brings us joy and comfort to this day to those who believe in Him. --“O tidings of comfort and joy!”

Thursday, December 3

By Phil Beauchamp, Vestry Class of 2022 and Senior Warden

As we all prepare for Advent and Christmas and the hope that Comfort and Joy will help us to reflect on the current challenging and difficult Covid context, I find myself drawn more than ever to my Christian belief and faith. I know that God surrounds us and that he is everywhere. From Heb. 13:5 “Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you.”

Yet we all face challenges to our faith during troubled times. I recently listened to a Christmas Concert Narration...*It is Well with My Soul* narrated by Hugh Bonneville. He tells the story of the Horatio Spafford family who amidst their darkest moments of life and the greatest of all adversity and family tragedy had shown that the human spirit can rise above all tragedy. He penned the Christian hymn *It Is Well With My Soul* and founded a Christian orphanage.

I find Comfort in the hope and peace of the Advent and Christmas season. It is a time for new birth and celebration of the light of Christ. For many years, I have carried with me a short reading titled Victory. As it says...”there is nothing, no circumstance, no trouble, no testing that can ever touch me until, first of all, it has gone past God and past Christ, right through to me.

If it has come that far, it has come with a great purpose...” Let us try to approach each day with a ‘happy heart’ seeking Joy and not allowing heartache to crush the spirit. From Romans 15:13...May the God of hope fill you with all JOY and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

I pray that we restore hope and bring healing to our lives. We shall not lose faith for we are all here for a purpose to love, support, and pray for our congregation.

May this Advent and Christmas Season bring you Comfort and Joy by opening your hearts to the love of God.

Friday, December 4

By Robyn Harker, Vestry Class of 2022

When I was growing up in New Jersey my family Christmas tradition was to attend the Christmas Eve service at 4 o'clock and then after we would go out for pizza. After dinner we would go home and decorate the Christmas tree, then off to bed to dream about Christmas morning.

When David and I got married, we continued the family tradition of my childhood with our children. David worked at the local post office, so he always had to work on Christmas Eve. Father Conklin, our priest, always waited to start the service until he saw David come into church still in his postal uniform so he could join us for the service.

Two days before Christmas 40 years ago, I received a call from the post office to come pick up David. He was extremely ill. I picked him up and we went straight to the hospital. They found he had a bowel blockage. They needed to operate, but they decided to wait until after Christmas. He had to stay in the hospital until his surgery.

On Christmas eve that year I tried to keep things as normal as possible. So, with my two young daughters in tow, we went to church and then went out for pizza. We came home that night and decorated the tree, I read them "Twas The Night Before Christmas" and tucked the girls in for the night. David's brother (who had enjoyed just a little too much Christmas cheer) was there to help me to get the gifts ready. I do not think that bike ever ran right.

This year will be vastly different for many families and some traditions will have to wait until next year. David and I will be spending our forty-ninth Christmas together, just the two of us. We will not be physically going to church or out to dinner, but we can watch the church service, have a frozen pizza, and decorate our tree. Even with just the two of us we will still be able to feel the Christmas spirit from all our family and friends. If it wasn't for their support and prayers all these years, I would not have been spending another Christmas with my Christmas miracle.

Saturday, December 5

By John C. Russotto, Vestry Class of 2022

As a young professional working at a university hospital, I was called to see a woman who was dying of cancer. She was bed-ridden, attached to life-support equipment, and scared. I was told she had no visitors, no family members and no place to go. There was nothing more that could be done for her. Speaking with her, I discovered that she was holding onto one hope. Prior to seeing the patient, I reviewed her chart, spoke with her oncology team, and was told by the nursing staff to “cheer her up” as she had no hope of living longer than a week.

I collected my thoughts and took a deep breath to calm myself. I pulled the curtain that separated her from another patient in the room to at least give the perception of privacy. I stood by her bedside and called her name. She reached out her hand to me. I took her hand in mine as I introduced myself. For the next twenty minutes she recounted her life’s story. She left home at a young age. She never finished high school. She didn’t marry, and she had no children. She survived on money she earned as a prostitute. She referred to herself as the “black sheep” of her family. I asked her if there was one thing she hoped I might do for her. She responded quickly. “Yes, sir, would you please contact my older sister? I want to see her one more time.” She was nearly exhausted and closed her eyes. I told her I would do what I could to contact her sister. Then I left.

The following day, I had to review her entire medical record to find one entry for a next-of-kin. I confirmed with her that the name in the record was her sister, but there was no guarantee that the address and telephone number were current. It was Friday afternoon when I called the listed number. I reached a gentle soul to whom I introduced myself and confirmed that, indeed, I had reached her sought-after sister. I explained the reason for my call. She expressed interest in her sister’s condition, but became disheartened to learn of her imminent demise. I learned that she lived in another state which was a great distance from the hospital. She explained that she was dependent on her daughter for transportation; otherwise, she would have to take a Greyhound bus. Even if she could quickly arrange transportation, there was no guarantee that her sister would still be alive. It was a chance she would take to see her sister alive one last time. Monday morning I arrived for my regular shift. I was eager to learn about my patient. During the morning report, the nursing staff matter-of-factly stated that the patient went into a coma Friday evening and remained in a coma until Sunday afternoon when she died.

But a remarkable thing also happened. The patient’s sister and niece unexpectedly arrived on Sunday morning. During their visit, the patient came out of coma for a short while during the time her sister and niece were by her side. Then, she quietly closed her eyes for the last time.

I realized she, indeed, had reason to hope. She knew that her Lord would deliver exactly what she needed and when she needed it most. I also realized what an amazing gift she gave to me - the gift of believing. That day, I learned hope doesn’t fail.

Sunday, December 6

The Second Sunday of Advent

By Carey Cherivtch, Spiritual Formation Leader, Communications Director

COMFORT AND JOY

How do you read that phrase? Simply, “comfort and joy” or maybe, “comfort and JOY!”? At times we might only hear the word “comfort” and want to respond with, “yes, please, now.” What if, for a moment, we instead focus on the word at the center - comfort *and* joy?

A N D

A connector word meaning in addition, together, along with, coexisting, part of the same grouping. Within the church we have many examples of connected items that are embraced together in our beliefs and traditions: Christ and the Church; Jesus is both God and human; and we recognize the Risen Lord while reflecting on all that was sacrificed during Lent. We are each participants in a world driven by human needs and members of God’s heavenly kingdom.

Right now, we can’t help but celebrate the birth of our Savior, Christmas, during Advent, a season of preparation. For us, this time of year has both holy and secular components with traditions, decorations, food, and activities embracing both comfort and joy.

This, for me, had always been a season filled with family and friends. Traditions with specific activities, meals, music, and persons were the highlight of my year. Then, in 2008 I made a bold, prayer-filled decision to move away from those comforts and joys of New England to a city in FL I barely knew, Dunedin, in the hope that my failing physical and emotional health would at least plateau. One of the greatest sacrifices of that move was knowing I’d miss out on opportunities, traditions, and celebrations with those I loved most. Little did I know, and still remind myself of a dozen years later, that I would be greatly rewarded, blessed, by that move - not only with significant health improvements, but with new friends who have become family. New holiday traditions of not having concrete traditions manifested. I was gifted with a new normal for this particular phase in my life and am a better, more complete person because of it.

Here we are collectively in 2020, finding ourselves in a year that has been chaotic, turbulent, frightening, life-changing AND constructive, strengthening, creative, rewarding. In this season of hope, I pray we each remember to embrace the AND wherever it may present itself. God is good AND you are loved.

Monday, December 7

By Bonnie Jean M. Durning, Clergy Spouse

Back in 1995, when we were in Parish Ministry full time, our community suffered a series of deaths of young people. It all started with the death of a 12 year old who was one of our young acolytes who had been hit by a car. Then there was the 20 year old young man that drowned in the Gulf of Mexico as a result of trying to rescue some young girls who had been stuck out in the wind on a jet ski that stopped working. There was a 14 year old that was electrocuted on a boat dock by a short in the electrical lift wire. The twin grandchildren of a parishioner that died at birth. So there was a lot of sadness and despair as Christmas was approaching.

We tried to alleviate the pain that so many were feeling. Our comfort was a small non-sectarian prayer service in the evening of the Feast of St. Nicholas. We lit the walkway to the church with luminaries. We provided candles on the altar for each of the victims with a few extra. We asked the families of the lost to name their loved one and light one of the candles. We prayed for each one as they were named. More people came up and named a loved one they were grieving and lit candles than we expected. We found more candles and more room on the altar than we ever imagined. God provided.

Comfort came to all of those that prayed and mourned together that night. This comfort then made it possible to share the Joy that is Christ in His birth.

Tuesday, December 8

By London Bates, Vestry Class of 2023

The Quiet and Stillness in Prayer

It is in times of quiet and stillness that I most feel God's beautiful and loving presence. I seek these quiet moments to spend time with God in peaceful prayer. These moments can be as simple as a quiet moment while driving by myself in the car, at my desk while taking a break from work, an intended meditation at my home or if ever so fortunate to be in a place surrounded by nature.

As I close my eyes in prayer, I am soothed by the quiet and stillness of the moment. I can feel God's loving embrace around me. I feel the light and warmth of God within me from the top of my head through my body to the tips of my toes. The warmth of God's presence in these moments surrounds me and soothes my mind and eases my worries.

I embrace the quiet and ask God to speak to me through the portal of my soul. In the stillness, I pray for God's guidance in my life. I pray for health, comfort and peace for my family and all of us.

With every breath I take, I ask God for strength, energy and vitality to help those in need. I ask for clarity in how to help those in need and for God to light the way of the path to show where I am needed for those around me.

God always welcomes me and assures me that he is always present and will bring understanding to me. God is always with us in these moments and all moments wherever we are.

Wednesday, December 9

By Judy Warner, Vestry Class of 2023

As we approach Christmas, I think about an event that affected my life forever. It was Dec. 1975 while I was finishing a semester in Spain and was getting ready to teach English in Madrid when a high school friend came to visit me there. She was studying abroad as well and had just finished up so we made a plan to connect. While she was sleeping in a hostel near me, poisonous carbon monoxide from a faulty heater seeped into her lungs, putting her into a deep, deathlike coma. Few victims of this ever recover and there was little room for hope. Her name was Judy as well. Judy lay in a coma for two months. During her long, prayerful vigil, her mother kept a journal and as a result, wrote a book about the event and long recovery. The story reveals God's healing power which was and is an inspiration to greater faith, prayer, love, and hope.

During this time, I turned to Jesus. I was 22 years old at the time and, although a Christian, didn't pray a lot or go to church. However, once this horrific incident happened to my friend in Madrid, my life changed. I began to pray as if MY life depended on it. Once her mother and uncle came to Spain and we made all the tough arrangements for her to fly home while still in a coma, I never prayed so hard in my life! And I began to read the Bible every day. Here is the letter that I wrote to Judy from Spain once I heard of the miracle of her first words spoken to an unexpecting nurse. The nurse was accustomed to coming into the room and greeting her every morning and with no response. Two months into the coma, one morning Judy responded, "good morning."

Dearest Judy,

Hello to you honey! You can't imagine how I felt when I heard the news of your miraculous recovery! Thanks be to God, who listened and heard our prayers! I've never prayed so hard in my life. I am ecstatic and overjoyed that you have recovered. I screamed when I heard that you were talking.

I told many of my students about this miracle. It's upsetting to me that I can't be there. I wanted to catch the first plane out of here to come and see you and talk to you and hug you! I dreamed just about every night that you'd come out of that sleep. I wanted it and prayed for it so hard. I just cry for joy when I think about the powers of God, and He used them to heal you!

For a while here in Madrid, life was really a drag for me. I didn't have my heart in my job, I had little ambition, and I wanted to go home. But things are much better now, and especially because you have recovered! I like my classes and my students are fun and neat. Briam Institute is a nice place to work.

I won't be coming home until the beginning of June so I won't be able to see you for another three and a half months. That's a long time, isn't it? I wish I could talk to you! You are a real celebrity around the Beloit area I hear: radio, TV, and newspapers!! You have been and still are in my thoughts and prayers. God bless you and your family.

With love, Judy

So Christmas time reminds me of how great Thou art. I was forever changed by this event and it was a beginning to a renewed love of the Lord. I give thanks to God for saving my friend who went on to finish a Master's degree, have a career, marry and raise three healthy children. A true miracle.

Thursday, December 10

By Joe Nixon, Parish Treasurer

But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. Luke 1:30

"Do not be afraid" - easier said than done, especially in the time of Covid. However, at this time each year I am reminded of the angels which surround me.

I invite you to close your eyes and think back to early March of 2020.

We were in church swelled to near capacity with snowbirds. The weather was fine, spring training in full swing, restaurants and performance spaces open, craft beer festival at the marina, etc.

Becky, Cindy and Bob are leading us in prayer and song...now look around you – do you spot the angels?

Over my nearly eleven years at Good Shepherd, I have grown to be less afraid by leaning on my angels to assist in my spiritual journey; individuals who do not seek the limelight and would be embarrassed by the recognition, so I will only highlight their actions.

Beginning with the welcome, the couple who drew me in with warmth and introduced me to you.

Another couple who I impose upon each time I need good advice and instruction.

The gentleman who introduced me to Father Richard Rohr and has changed the way I start each day.

The widow and widower who manage to carry on after the loss of their spouse.

The couples married for many, many years and still love each other greatly.

The saints who visit the shut-ins offering communion, compassion, and encouragement.

The volunteers at the Little Thrift Shop and Furniture Thrift Store.

The altar guild members, flower arrangers, ushers, musicians, singers, bell ringers.

The fellow who is actually happy to see me each Sunday.

Those who care for the buildings and grounds.

And, of course, the Canadians who love me for who I am.

Despite the virus, I can still spot my angels who help me more than they will ever know – and I thank God for them every day.

Now that the world has seemed to hit the pause button, please join me in spotting your angels and thanking them with a phone call, email, note card, letter, or any way you deem appropriate during this season of hope and anticipation. Peace be with you.

Friday, December 11

By C. Pat Cates, Parish Clerk

We are all affected by the current pandemic. Whether family or friends we all know someone who has tested positive, had a mild case or perhaps been seriously ill in the hospital. There was another pandemic which received very little coverage—the “Spanish” flu of 1918. According to stories that Carol’s father told us, his mother, father and sister were all victims of the flu. It has been estimated that one-third of the world’s population was infected with the virus with approximately 50 million people dying worldwide and deaths in the United States reaching 675,000 persons.

In reading about the 1918 pandemic there are many similarities to our situation today. Schools, churches and businesses were closed and persons were told to wear masks, wash frequently and stay away from affected persons. Sermons were published in newspapers—a far cry from watching them online!

Despite all the horrors of the 1918 pandemic there are countless stories of Americans helping fellow Americans without regard for their own safety. One 10 year old girl reported that it was her job to take food to families who had been stricken with the flu. In one city a father took an acre of his yard and planted sweet potatoes which were given to the neighbors. Local churches in Buffalo, New York arranged “open air services” for their congregations. In Worcester, Massachusetts women from three local churches took care of “epidemic orphans” by giving them food and clothing. Milwaukee clergy, their sermons printed in the newspapers, devoted their energies to pastoral care and sick calls. Finally, volumes were written about the nurses who “put themselves on the line knowing they themselves could contract the same illness.”

I find great comfort in the words of Isaiah 40: The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles, they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”

Ancient Hebrew culture revered eagles as mighty warriors who were known for their strength and courage in dangerous situations. Eagles build their nests on high ledges or in very tall trees. Young eagles are encouraged to fly by their parents, and if the young ones cannot stay airborne, the parents will swoop under it and carry it on its wings back to the nest.

Yes, Covid 19 is a horrible situation, but we must not lose hope. For just as the eagle watches over his young so will our God watch over us and when we are about to fall He will swoop us up in His wings. This is so beautifully sung in Josh Groban’s “On Eagle’s Wings”. When you’re down take a moment to listen to this beautiful song. You will be lifted on Eagle’s Wings.

Saturday, December 12

By Butch Niford, Chair, Buildings and Ground Committee

God's unconditional love speaks to me constantly of Comfort and Joy. This statement is awesome--God's Love.

This brings back wonderful memories. When Diane and I were living in the California Sierra Mountains, at the 5,200-foot level, we attended a local Methodist church where I was one of a few members who gave the weekly children's message as part of the worship service.

My message one Sunday was about God's unconditional love. To help support this, we brought our Border collie, MacKenzie. As soon as MacKenzie heard my voice from the back of the church, she came running down the aisle to me at the altar, almost dislocating Diane's arm in the process. The kids went wild with delight to welcome her, to pet and hug her. We talked about how MacKenzie, like most pets, trust and love us.

We had MacKenzie on her leash as we went up for Communion and were very touched when our Pastor offered her the bread of our Lord.

One week day she accompanied us to church for a meeting. There was a preschool down the hall and the children were peeking at her from their classroom. The teacher asked us if we thought she could visit them. Knowing her love for children, we agreed and followed the excited dog to their room. She dropped to the floor and let the children climb, poke and pet. You could hear the sounds of love, joy and laughter throughout the church.

What do our pets ask in return? To be loved as they love us. This is similar to God's love: pure, unrestricted, and infinitely full of joy and hope. And what does God ask in return? Our love, faithfulness, and obedience.

For us, during beautiful times and those times when we were sick or just sad or discouraged, MacKenzie was ALWAYS there with her love for us, with her smile or dog kisses or just to cuddle with us.

During this Advent Season, we celebrate God's unconditional love for us through the birth of His Holy Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. May we always remember God's unconditional love for us. For reassurance I like to read John 3:16-17 ... For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son ... and 1 Corinthians 13:13 . . . And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

May your Advent be filled with love, faith, and hope.

Sunday, December 13

The Third Sunday of Advent

By the Rev. Cindy Roehl, Deacon

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord." - Luke 23:8-11

This has been a difficult holiday season, and here we are in the middle of December waiting for Christmas.

Christmas. A time of Christmas trees and sparkly decorations. The hustle and bustle of shopping. Jingle Bells. Family gatherings. Opening and giving presents.

But not this year. This year is different. And it's hard.

And maybe this isn't the first hard Christmas you've experienced. Maybe for your situation this has been your experience for a number of years.

However, even in the midst of heartache, anxiety and loneliness, we can find Joy.

Our Joy is in Christ Jesus – that little baby born so many years ago.

Remember when Mary visited her cousin, Elizabeth, who was six months pregnant with John (who became the baptizer), Elizabeth said, "But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for Joy."

The Christ child hadn't even been born yet, but His very presence in Mary's womb brought Joy.

And when the angels came to the shepherds that night, they said they "bring good news that will cause great Joy for all the people."

Our Joy is in our Lord Jesus, Our Savior.

I, too, have had some difficult holiday seasons over the years. But in those times, I have learned to find my Joy in God and in the Christ child whom we celebrate at this time. I find my Joy in serving Him. In receiving His love. And I experience His Joy.

And I wish this for you. Joy to the world – and to you, my friend.

Monday, December 14

By Heather Elder, Altar Guild

2020 has been, and still is, a different and difficult year for us all.

We have had to learn to live differently, sometimes in isolation and social distancing from our families and friends, our church, to do without some things and eat differently.

We look forward to this season of Advent to Christmas and the celebration of Jesus' birth using the theme of Comfort and Joy.

Webster's Dictionary says the meaning of Comfort is 'to soothe in distress or sorrow, relief from distress. May we, during this month of Advent, with Daily Prayer prepare, as we are surrounded with the busyness of Christmas, Santas, trees, gifts and carols, to welcome the birth of Jesus with Joy.

Webster's Dictionary says the meaning of Joy is 'a very glad feeling, happiness and delight'. May we be able to celebrate this year, with Joy, together with family, friends, and at our place of Worship even if our services are different from other years, as we give thanks for our Blessings and pray for those who may be suffering.

Tuesday, December 15

By Christine Tsotsos, COG Crafters

COMFORT FAITH TRUST

There's a season for everything and a time for every matter under the heavens. God has made everything in its time, but has also placed eternity in their hearts without enabling them to discover what God has done from the beginning to end." Ecclesiastes 3: 1, 11

These beautiful verses speak so clearly to my heart. Earth's rhythms and life's cycles are God's gifts. The assurance of God being in control of eternity strengthens my faith. The fact that He knows what He's doing in all things, from beginning to end, encourages unwavering trust.

Life ain't easy, right?

As I've grown older and have experienced the gamut of emotions from glee to grief; Ecclesiastes plays in my head assuring me that God's got me and He's not letting go. He is absolutely dedicated to each and every one of us and gives us glimpses of His beautiful brilliance through Nature, Art, and the perfection of Science and Math. He allows us to feel all the feels. Every "feel" is a gift because even the yucky ones cause us to turn our eyes to Him so we can notice Him working his LOVE.

And boy! Does He surprise me!

I've discovered that everything and everybody good in my life can be traced back to difficult prayers prayed during difficult times. The amazing and loving friendships and relationships He has given me. The sweet, tender animals He's allowed me to love. And, may I say, the way He works my hands when I create quilts from ordinary cloth and thread.

That's all Him, and I KNOW IT.

Up until a couple years ago the last time I had my hands on a sewing machine was in 8th grade. I made an apron. Sewing was never in my wheelhouse UNTIL IT WAS. Quilting is the special gift He gave me....and I absolutely know it to be true.

It's not perfect, I'm still learning.

I even recognize His hand in that process. Ecclesiastes has and will always speak to me

Keep your eyes wide open! Recognize His majesty! Have faith in Him. He's unwaveringly loyal as He works in our lives and will always surprise and lift us.

He knows EXACTLY what we need.

Wednesday, December 16

By Dan Depies, Vestry Class of 2023 and Junior Warden

I grew up in a small Wisconsin town just outside of Milwaukee. I went to a religious grade school where I attended mass with my class during the week and then again with my family on Sunday's. Although many of my cousin's also attended the same school, my perception of the congregation of the church was a group of people who attended service to hear the message and then went back to their homes to continue their personal lives.

In the years that I have been a member of the Church of the Good Shepherd my understanding of being a member of a congregation has changed significantly. Although members have their non-church family and friends, I also feel I am part of the Good Shepherd family. We may not always agree with each other, but many of us work, pray and play together much like an extended family.

I feel that the members of the Good Shepherd family are very fortunate to have the support of each other to help manage through bad times and celebrate the good.

Thursday, December 17

By Garry Lumm, Parish Custodian

I seldom have to look further than my own household to find comfort and joy. I am surrounded by family who are the epitome of love, understanding, and respect. And even though my family geographically is quite spread out, (Washington state, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Ohio, and of course Florida), I never feel very far away from any of them.

One of my greatest pleasures recently has been the determination of my beautiful wife Jen for us to do some traveling and get to see some of our amazingly spectacular country. Our month long trip through New England in June of 2019, was a highlight of my life. Hopefully there will be many more trips for us in our future as I chug along towards retirement.

I have to say that our present happiness and good fortune would not have been possible without my long and wonderful association with Good Shepherd. The first time I came to G.S. I was greeted by a true gentleman named Jerry Myers. I will never forget the warm welcome I got. And I will tell you, that is one thing that has never changed here at Good Shepherd. As with everyone, this has been a very different year than any other, but I feel that in many ways we are closer as a family, not only in my household, but here at Good Shepherd also.

I am blessed to be a part of this Parish and the gracious and wonderful people here.

Love to all!!!

The Lumm family

Friday, December 18

By Carolyn Hughes, Endowment Fund Board of Trustees

2 Corinthians, 1:3-4

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us all in our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

Ten years ago, having retired from a very busy and successful career, I found myself in a lovely seaside town with a new home and a much quieter lifestyle. Still, something was missing. As I wandered, I felt myself drawn to a beautiful 100+ year old church. I was welcomed warmly by a couple who showed me that here all were welcome. As a fallen away cradle catholic, I was surprised to find a dynamic woman priest leading the service....she had me with her first sermon!

As I began to attend regularly, the ministries fell in line, one after one. First, the endowment, then lector, singing and joyous ringing. Increasingly, I felt a part of an important and inclusive church family, with fellowship and great comfort growing each day.

Over the years here I have been blessed to grow on my spiritual journey and I thank God for the gifts he has given me. I hope to pay back in full the comfort and joy that being part of Good Shepherd has provided me.

While we await the arrival of our Lord Jesus this season, I pray everyone is filled with the comfort and joy I have been blessed to find. Peace.

Saturday, December 19

By Andrea Zahn, Co-Chair, Search Committee

My grandmother Agnes Gregory was born in Glasgow Scotland, and like many other European immigrants, she and her family entered the U.S. through Ellis Island. She met my Danish grandfather Ivar, and they had a wonderful life together. For most of my childhood they lived in Connecticut before moving to Florida in their retirement years. When we were kids, trips to their home for Sunday dinners and visits were magical - always full of adventure, laughter, and amazing food. "Granny" as we called her was an accomplished cook and we would delight in all her yummy desserts. She could sew anything, including matching outfits for my sister and me. Scottish traditions were strong in our family and I grew up wearing kilts, listening to bagpipes, watching her do the Highland fling with a lampshade on her head and eating Scottish specialties. My mother handed down many of her Scottish memorabilia to me.

When our family settled in the Palm Harbor area, I was thrilled that the ties to Scotland were so strong in Dunedin. I am sure my Granny smiles down from heaven each year when we call out the names of our Scottish clans at Good Shepherd, when inviting a piper to play, or when the Highland Games are in town. Now that I am blessed to be a grandmother, I hope one day that my grandchildren will fondly remember their "Mimi" the way I remember my grandmother. I'm sharing one of the recipes I remember most - her Scottish shortbread. Enjoy!

Shortbread

1 lb. butter

1 cup sugar

3 3/4 cups sifted flour

1/4 teaspoon salt

Mix dry ingredients. Work sugar into butter and then add in flour. Bake for about 45 minutes in a slow oven (250-300 degrees) until light brown. Prick with fork on cookie sheet.

Sunday, December 20

The Fourth Sunday of Advent

By Bob Moncrief, Organist-Choirmaster

It is impossible to think of Christmas without music, and it has been my pleasure to celebrate the season with churches for over 40 years. There was a particular Christmas, 1983, that holds special association with “comfort and joy” for me.

My choir was joining with two other choirs to sing Ralph Vaughan Williams’ *Hodie* (“This Day”) with a large orchestra, in a Sunday evening concert. The Catholic church was cathedral-like, and the musician there did all he could, including darkened church with bright lights on the choir and orchestra, to make everything splendid.

I was the tenor soloist, and the big tenor solo was a tour de force. I knew my father was close to death from colon cancer, and I planned to drive home with great haste the next day to say farewell. My mother thought our concert was in the afternoon, so she waited until evening to call with the news that he had passed away that afternoon. This was less than an hour before our 7:00 p.m. concert. All I could do was say to myself, “I can’t think about this right now.” What a text I sang:

“Bright portals of the sky, embossed with sparkling stars, doors of eternity, with diamantine bars, your arras rich uphold, loose all your bolts and springs, open wide your leaves of gold, that in your roofs may come the King of Kings. O glory of the heaven! O sole delight of earth! Still be thou our salvation and our song!”

With the dazzle of the bright lights, I saw Heaven’s gates open for Christ’s coming, even as I sang farewell to Dad as he entered those gates. If there ever was a feeling of Heaven touching earth for me, it was in that moment. It reminded me that even amid our sorrows, God would be with us and give us comfort and joy. And at the end of the journey there would be brightness and splendor. Perhaps the solo that night was the best I had ever sung it. I thank God for that glimpse of Heaven.

Monday, December 21

By Mary Ratliff, Search Committee Co-Chair

When my husband and I had been married for about 3 years we purchased a farm with some of my husband's family. We were going to build three homes on the farm. It was a beautiful 180 acres of rolling farmland complete with woods and ponds and a creek. Jim and I built our home first and we choose a site seven tenths of a mile from the main road. It was in a small valley on the farm with a view of a pond from our front porch and woods and hills and fields and our cattle from our back deck. It was beautiful in each of the seasons.

I was working in Lexington which was a 35 mile commute morning and evening and our offices were downtown with loads of traffic and one way streets. I loved my job but I can hardly explain the comfort and blessing I would feel each and every day when I turned my car from the highway into our farm road and slowly drove the seven tenths of a mile to my home. I would just sigh and smile and breathe. I could get a glass of tea and sit on the deck with absolutely no city sounds. It was wonderful. It was quietly joyful.

In John O'Donohue's book *To Bless the Space Between Us*,
one of his poems titled *For Celebration* begins with:

*Now is the time to free the heart
Let all intentions and worries stop,
Free the joy inside the self,
Awaken to the wonder of your life.*

Tuesday, December 22

By Dawn Gordon, Parish Administrator

The few days leading up to Christmas Eve growing up in Dalton Massachusetts were full of stress-packed activity: rehearsals, performances, multiple church services, late nights. The list was long and time felt thin and brittle. We ran headlong into Christmas, like kids who get going downhill and don't know how to control their speed.

Christmas is the extrovert of the church calendar (along with Easter, of course).

It's social and busy. It's loud and flashy and well-fed and adorned. It's beautiful and charismatic, and has the most wonderful story to tell. People often talk about wanting a more peaceful Christmas, but, in the end, its call to come and join the party is a tough one to turn down. Christmas is the guest everyone is eagerly watching for. We're looking out the window, checking our watches, squealing with glee, and clamoring to the door as it finally pulls into the driveway. *It's here! It's here!*

Maybe this is why I have always loved the shoulder seasons of the church, and Advent in particular. It is an introvert's season.

Advent is expectant and full of hope. There's also a solemn quality to the waiting — not dour or dreary — something grounded and okay with a close stillness, a quality that honors the waiting itself as sacred.

It is a patient season. It asks us to be patient, too. Advent asks us to make peace with the lingering and reminds us that we can. It gently shows us again that there can be deep joy in that in-between place, that one-foot-in-front-of-the-other pace.

Certainly there is room for both the celebratory and the subdued. I just find that when Advent rolls around my heart is so hungry for that deliberate quieting in the midst of the noise.

The church in 21st-century America does a lot of talking. Advent resets the church as a space for holy listening, something that it desperately needs more of. The church does a lot of deciding and declaring. Advent calls us to reflect on the profound power of being, even — perhaps especially — when we don't have all the answers.

How can I be a space — simple, open, warm, stilled — that is prepared to receive the smallest, humblest, most vulnerable version of divinity when it comes quietly knocking at my door? Can I welcome a God I don't recognize at first, a God who shows up in rags, comes from another country, and is dependent on my meager shelter? Am I brave enough for that?

Wednesday, December 23

By Maureen Belote, Parish Ministry Partner for Episcopal Relief & Development

The excitement of being a child and awaiting Christmas was visiting and having lunch with Santa, seeing the decorations and Christmas trees, visiting Santa's village in Morristown, NJ, where Santa came down the fire ladder from the roof of Macy's and helping to wrap presents is what gave me and all my friends the greatest joy. For us, it was the best day of the year. While we knew about baby Jesus, the emphasis of joy was for the gifts.

My brother, John, was 7 years older than me. He was a relentless tease for most of my childhood. The biggest surprise was in 1957, though, when he had his first leave from the Navy and gave me a hi fi record player and the top twenty hits on 45 records! It was the first time I felt he loved me.

I'd like to say that Jesus became the focal point as I matured and made my confirmation, but alas, the joy of giving started with my high school boyfriend. At least at that point I had learned the joy of giving as well as receiving.

As a parent, I found the joy of making my child feel the kind of joy I remembered when I was his age. Indeed now the joy of giving was better than the receiving.

My son is grown, as are most of our grandchildren. Gone are the days of near chaos and flurry of wrapping paper thrown all over. Ryan, Gene and I open our gifts after the beautiful late evening service on Christmas Eve. Checks go out to the grandchildren, along with a special gift in honor of Jesus' birthday.

I find great joy in giving items from the Gifts for Life Catalog through Episcopal Relief & Development. Gene and I choose something to give in the names of each of our 13 grandchildren and one great grandson, explaining to them why we do it and how it helps someone who may not have toys, clean water, or safety from malaria. It has opened dialog with them about how their life is helping others, connecting gift giving to Christmas.

For the past few years we have also given 10 gifts in the name of Christian friends who we feel have followed Jesus' command to love others in his name. These, to me, are the best gifts to the birthday boy, Jesus, from whom we get the most comfort all our lives.

It's also cool that these gifts can be given on line, even on Christmas Day.

This year I am focused on helping mothers in places I will never go to but whom Jesus loves just as much as ours. I was blessed to have good parents who nourished me with good food, feelings that I was important, and compassion for others. I have learned that the first 1,000 days of a child's life from birth are so very critical in helping them achieve their lifelong potential. My joy will be comforting those children and their parents in thanksgiving for what I was able to have in my childhood.



Community

Blue Christmas Service

A reflective service for all who grieve,
all who know sorrow, all who yearn for Peace on Earth

All are welcome

Sunday, December 6, 2020 @ 6:30 PM

639 Edgewater Drive, Dunedin, Florida 34698
(727) 733-4125

Christmas Eve 7:00 PM

Christmas Day 10:00 AM

This year, our Christmas celebrations will be observed using our “Safe Church” measures.

- If you are not feeling well, **attend online** at www.COGSDunedin.com.
- Wear a **mask** while in church.
- Observe **safe-distancing** of 6 feet or more.
- We will distribute the **Bread only** at Communion.
- Reservations for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day services are required. Seating will be limited to the first 50 guests with reservations. Please contact Cheryl Sharpe at clsharpe21@gmail.com or 727-458-7291, or use this form to reserve in-person spaces for you and your loved ones. The form will be posted to cogsdunedin.com/2020-christmas-services
- Overflow guests at the 7 PM Christmas Eve gathering will have the option of viewing the live-streamed service from our parish hall. We will bring Communion to you in Kirk Hall.

We Aspire:

*To live in a world where all creation
thrives in God’s love,*



And Seek:

To become who God created us to be by

Worshiping Joyfully

Respecting All

Sharing Generously

Nurturing Every Spirit